

CIVIDALE IN THE GREAT WAR.

By Giulia Sattolo.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR.

Neutrality is a precise duty for Italy, it is not a cowardly expedient whereby the country can stand to one side while others fight; it is a high duty towards Europe, a duty towards humanity which is asked [...] not to extend and aggravate the carnage with a participation that is not justified by any evident and pressing reason. This appeared on 2 August 1914 in the newspaper *Il Secolo*.

In July 1914, the events had taken the Italian government by surprise: Austria had not only sent the ultimatum to Serbia without informing *our Country*, but had started an offensive war that was in open contrast with all that was contemplated by the treatise of the Triple Alliance.

With good reason, on 2 August 1914, Italy had therefore officially declared its neutrality, thus offering the French the possibility to remove the troops from the Alpine frontier and concentrate all the forces available on the Marne to defend Paris.

Public opinion was divided into two main currents, apart from a very few who appeared willing to stand by the Central Powers; on the one hand were those in favour of neutrality (Catholics, Socialists and Liberals) and on the other hand the interventionists.

“We must abandon neutrality, today [...]. If we got out any later, we would encounter greater misfortune if the Austro-Germans were to win, or we would be held in low esteem if the western allies were to win. As many newspapers have remarked, delaying our intervention against a defeated Austria would earn us the sad fame of the descendants of Maramaldo.” This was the opinion expressed by *La Stampa* on 23 September 1914.

In the ten months between August 1914 and May 1915 there were heated discussions, violent demonstrations and agonized uncertainties, while the Italian government sought to obtain territorial compensation in Trentino and Istria from Vienna, in exchange for neutrality. At the same time, the powers of the Entente were trying to attract Italy to their side.

In the end, the Foreign Minister, Sidney Sonnino, decided to sign the so-called Treaty of London with the powers of the Entente, on 26 April 1915: Italy assured the allies that it would enter the war on their side within no more than 30 days; the allies recognised Italy's right to extend its territory to Istria and Trentino-Alto Adige and to annex the Dodecanese, a part of Dalmatia, and compensation in the form of colonies, when the time came for France and Great Britain to share out the territories of the German colonies in Africa.

This pact remained secret until 1917.

On 24 May 1915 the Kingdom of Italy declared war only against Austria-Hungary after having sent an ultimatum the previous day: that was the beginning of the hostilities on the Italian-Austrian front.

And so, for more than two years, from May 1914 to the defeat of Caporetto in 1917, Friuli became the rearguard of the bloody battle front and was occupied by an army of more than a million men in a region with only 600,000 inhabitants.

In the first half of May, Friuli was already full of armies; since March, the flow of military personal had accentuated, putting the region's absorption capacity to a hard test, and there was an urgent need for fortified structures for both defence and offence.

Roads, bridges and trenches were quickly built and the local people took part in all this work.

The population who during the period of neutrality had been working on these constructions when the country entered the war put themselves at the disposal of the military authorities, collaborating with the soldiers.

When war broke out, the Army Chief of Staff, Luigi Cadorna, was convinced that the conflict would be over in a short time, expecting that the Austro-Hungarian troops would be overcome by a series of *breakthroughs*, but right from the start reality proved otherwise. The border, which had been laid down in 1866 at the end of the Third War of Independence, was carefully studied by the Viennese government since it had left Austria in control of the passes and of all the peaks, which had been fortified with trenches and walkways built for defence purposes.

The Italian army was therefore fighting in a situation of strong disadvantage; although numerically superior, it was equipped with inadequate and antiquated armaments. The Habsburg army was numerically inferior, but it was better organised and its equipment was of much better quality. The war was hard above all due to the impervious nature of the front, which imposed fighting in inhuman conditions; logistic problems, which were an obvious consequence, obliged the engineering corps to adopt every possible expedient to allow movements.

General Cadorna's offensive plan, along the border line, was based on three large areas of intervention: the first contemplated an offensive on the Julian front, to cross the Isonzo and reach the line of the Sava; the second consisted substantially of maintaining the positions on the front in Trentino and especially of strengthening that zone which, more than the others, presented a dangerous possibility for enemy troops to penetrate Italian territories; the third area comprised the offensive in Cadore and in Carnia, with the final objective of breaking through into Carinthia.

At the start of the hostilities, the Italian troops took up position almost everywhere beyond the enemy lines, winning good bases from which to start the next actions. On the Julian front they won Caporetto and took possession of the mountain ridge between the Isonzo and the Judrio, while in the plain they immediately broke through the Austrian lines and settled at Cormòns, Cervignano and Grado. In early June Gradisca d'Isonzo fell into Italian hands, as did Monfalcone and Monte Nero.

After that the Italian offensive became much slower and it was more and more difficult to advance, because the Austrian army, as well as having greater experience in trench warfare, had the advantage of holding all the dominant positions.

Cadorna's senseless tactic sacrificed many men to achieve the desired ends, and the Italian army was launched in a frontal attack against the enemy in eleven battles on the Isonzo, with an enormous loss of human life.

24 MAY 1915. CIVIDALE

On the front of the 2nd Army, from the Canin to the Carso, the Italian troops crossed the border at Pulfero, at Stupizza and at Luico (Livek) and headed towards Caporetto. The little town in Slovenia had been occupied on the afternoon of 24 May without encountering any resistance because the Austrian troops had left the town and withdrawn to the mountains, where they had prepared the defence works.

In Cividale, a few days before war was declared, the inhabitants saw trenches being dug quickly around the town, while bridges were built over the Natisone, at Azzida, Purgessimo and Grupignano. Late in the afternoon of 24 May they heard news of the advance and burst out into jubilant demonstrations; a few wounded arrived towards evening, while an Austrian flag was burnt in Piazza del Duomo and some people considered suspicious were arrested¹.

The Ursuline Monastery was very much involved in the events of the war. On 26 July, it generously opened its doors to take in people with infectious fevers. From that moment on, the 31st Field Hospital was installed in the nuns' boarding school and the portico and was received with great dignity by the Mother Superior, Maria Alfonsa Coletti, who supervised everything from 5 in the morning and asked for nothing in return².

They thought that peace would come quickly, considering the speed at which the Italian army was advancing; but it soon had to stop when it encountered the strong defences prepared by the Austrians.

The conflict was not as fast as had been expected, and this meant that some generals lost their command. The orders given from on high were unquestionable and consisted of breaking through the enemy trenches; Cividale thus became a military town and the rearguard of the Italian army.

SHORT TIMELINE OF HISTORIC EVENTS 1915

23 June FIRST offensive on the Isonzo which ended on 7 July. Frontal attack against the enemy army which did not have a positive outcome, but caused the loss of many human lives.

18 July. SECOND frontal offensive on the Isonzo which ended on 4 August, always with negative results for the Italian army.

21 August. Italy declared war on Turkey.

18 October. THIRD battle on the Isonzo which lasted until 4 November.

10 November. FOURTH battle on the Isonzo where the Italian army tried in vain to break through the Austrian defence line.

At the end of the four battles on the Isonzo, the Italian army had suffered very serious losses: 62,000 dead and 170,000 wounded, that is a quarter of the deployed forces.

1915.

Cividale was strategically important for its geographical location and more: it offered all the basic services to the soldiers who were in the front line; there were medical services, veterinary services, warehouses for supplies and depots, relief services and positions for heavy artillery.

¹ Cf. Giuseppe Del Bianco, *La guerra e il Friuli*, vol. II, p. 15, Udine, Del Bianco Editore, 2001.

² Cf. Maria Agostina Del Negro, *Le Orsoline a Cividale*, p. 73, Premariacco, Juliagraf, 2000.

It was a logistic base for both for soldiers leaving for the front and for those on the way back. This also required alterations of the streets, which were widened to allow heavy vehicles to pass. The considerable flow of troops and material to the town had transformed the streets into a dreadful condition, with mud and dust all over the carriageway. All this prevented the movement of traffic and the 2nd Army Command had urged the Municipality several times to carry out maintenance. When the south wind was blowing in Cividale, transit was impossible because of the amount of mud.

The soldiers began to plunder the vineyards and fields where they were encamped, causing serious damage to the crops and to the farmers' families. The wheat, rye and barley harvests were poor and this led the population to protest, especially the women and workers. Work was in short supply and the brutal increase of inflation aggravated the hardship of the poorer classes.

There was an increase in deaths and infectious diseases, caused especially by malnutrition, and the birth rate fell at the same time. To improve this disastrous situation, the parish priest of Cividale, Mons. Valentino Liva, who had begun his pastoral care in Cividale in 1913, published notices in the press inviting the families of the "Pia Opera di S. Vincenzo" to offer help to the poor in their homes³.

With the arrival of more and more troops, the problems and inconvenience for the population increased and people were forced to deal with painful and difficult situations every day.

On the evening of 26 June, bombs were dropped on Cividale for the first time, and even arrows consisting of a pointed cone; there was another air raid on 5 July and again on 15 August.

The Municipality had organised a lookout post on the bell-tower of the Duomo so that the soldiers could warn the population of the arrival of the Austrian planes, which usually dropped the bombs at night.

Some groups of townspeople, moved by compassion, went to comfort the wounded in transport who were gathered at the railway station, waiting to be sent home.

The population provided aid to the wounded in the ten hospitals in Cividale, one of which was at the headquarters of the Società Operaia di Mutuo Soccorso ed Istruzione (SOMSI).

In 1914, with war imminent and general mobilisation in progress not only in Friuli but throughout the Kingdom of Italy, the SOMSI had made available its premises for the military management of the territory.

From the month of June, the rooms of the school of arts and crafts, at SOMSI, had been occupied by the military authority and were used as a Hospital; many of the furnishings used in the school were requisitioned by the hospital management⁴.

³ Cf. Bruno Baccino , *Un apostolo friulano del '900. Mons. Valentino Liva*, p.147, Tavagnacco, Arti Grafiche Friulane, 2007.

⁴ Cf. ASO Cart. 72, fasc.13, 1915; Verbale della seduta consigliere dell'1° dicembre 1915, in Ada Pellegrini Scafati, *La Società Operaia di Mutuo Soccorso ed Istruzione di Cividale del Friul. 1870-1914*, vol.I, p.133, n. 148, SOMSI, c2002 (Premariacco : Juliagraf, 2003).

The first cases of cholera among the civilian population began to appear in summer 1915. The Town Council had to adopt immediate measures necessary to combat the infection and restore the peace of mind of the population, who were greatly upset.

The emergency had prompted the formation of various committees in the town which concentrated their actions in providing assistance.

In 1914 the Town Hall of Cividale had granted its patronage for the creation of a Committee in favour of the Unemployed, and the newly elected Chairman Freschi asked the Chairman of SOMSI, Ettore Zanuttini, if the Association could help with economic support. This committee received numerous requests for help from workers who had been forced to return home from abroad, where they had been working, and were now without a job to support their families.

In fact, due to the imminent state of war all over Europe, the workers who were employed outside the national borders were forced to return home. The situation got worse every day, because in addition to the men who were called up to serve in the army and had to leave their families, factory workers found the factories closed. The Italians who had emigrated and were forced to return found themselves with no prospects and not guarantee of work, in a condition of involuntary unemployment. It was therefore necessary to help the repatriated emigrants by trying to involve them in special maintenance work and urgent public and private works, considering also the offer of labour under good conditions.

The emigrants could apply to the Emigration Secretariat in Via della Posta in Udine, where they could present a request for the salaries they had not received, for their luggage and all other items that had been lost or abandoned abroad. It was very important for these newly repatriated citizens to be able to solve these problems concerning items that were lost or failed to arrive, because they did not have much. Frequently, if their belongings could not be found, they were given cash compensation.

In Cividale, thanks to the help of SOMSI, an officer had been made available for emigrants from 11 to 12 in the morning and from 2 to 4 in the afternoon, at the Unione Commercianti, located in the building of the Banca Commerciale. The officer recorded the names and surnames of the emigrants and the place where they had settled abroad; these documents were then attached to the claims which were sent to the Emigration Secretariat in Udine⁵.

Baron Morpurgo was the person most sensitive and attentive to the problems and needs of the repatriated people in Friuli. Along with other members of Parliament from Friuli he promoted the presentation of a report containing all the requests arriving from Friuli, to support the situation and the delicate and difficult condition that had been created. Morpurgo asked for the immediate sending of subsidies and the granting of the necessary extensions to the emigrants: his request was successful.

Other initiatives were also undertaken in the town to provide assistance, such as the work of the Civil Assistance Committee, founded to cope with the dramatic needs that arose every day during the conflict.

The activities of this Committee can be divided into two periods: the first covers the time between the date Italy entered the war, 24 May 1915, and the end of 1916.

⁵ Cf. Ada Pellegrini Scafati, *La Società Operaia di Mutuo Soccorso ed Istruzione di Cividale del Friul. 1915-1940, vol.II, p.14-15*, SOMSI, c2002 (Premariacco, Juliagraf, 2003).

The second goes from 1 January 1917 to 31 January 1918: in this period the Committee's activity became regular because a brief Statute had been approved by the government.

The Committee received numerous donations that were used to assist the wounded, the sick, and to support families. It was thanks to the Committee's contribution that the Ufficio Notizie (News Office) was able to carry out its task.

Before the Committee was formed (officially established in the Mayor's office in early June), a group composed of only women had been organised quickly on 24 May 1915 with the aim of providing immediate assistance to the wounded who were arriving in Cividale. This female group was then joined by representatives of the Dante Alighieri Society, the SOMSI, the Unione Commercianti and the Red Cross; this collaboration enabled them to perform a stronger joint action.

Mons. Valentino Liva was one of the founders of this Committee.

During the Christmas period, between 1915 and 1916, the Committee organised the Soldier's Christmas in the hospitals in Cividale, with the aid of the population. A special collection was held in which the townspeople and clergy of Cividale took part in order to give gifts to the soldiers. As Mons. Liva wanted to ensure that the gifts went to needy soldiers, he went in person to visit the trenches.

He wanted to stress how generous the population had been to the soldiers.

During the festive period, medals were also struck which were given to the combatants; they were made of gold for the officers and silver for the troops.

Thanks to the many donations received in that period (the Town Hall of Cividale alone gave £.500), the Committee immediately began looking for gifts and *decided to prepare three thousand packets containing a tricolour handkerchief, personal items [...], two oranges and other gifts offered by various companies in Milan. [...] As many as 1,039 gifts were distributed in exact proportion among the patients in the military hospitals*⁶.

The traditional Christmas tree was also prepared in the hospitals.

The Assistance Committee helped not only the hospital patients, but also the soldiers leaving or arriving at the railway station in Cividale. Groups of women went to meet each train of wounded that arrived in the town, handing out water and cold drinks, sweets, milk, cigarettes, and so on.

THE CIVIDALE-CAPORETTO RAILWAY

The construction of the Cividale-Caporetto railway was part of this situation of general mobilisation and the necessities of war. The line was built for essentially military purposes, even though the general plan had been conceived several years previously. Since the early years of the twentieth century there had been talk of the need to build a railway line connecting the Friuli hinterland, through the valleys of the Natisone, to the Transalpine railway (which linked the cities of Trieste and Gorizia to the heart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) in order to favour the economy and trade in this peripheral area of the Kingdom of Italy.

A project was presented in 1911 which contemplated passing through the valleys along the course of the river Natisone as far as Caporetto. Although the proposal was initially supported by the categories involved and by political parties, it was rejected by the Ministry of War which saw it as more a danger than a resource.

⁶ Cf. *Relazione Morale – finanziaria del Comitato cividalese per doni di Natale agli ammalati e feriti di guerra*, F.lli Stagni, Cividale, 1915, in Ada Pellegrini Scafati, *La Società Operaia di Mutuo Soccorso ed Istruzione di Cividale del Friul. 1915-1940*, vol.II, p.24,n.33, SOMSI, c2002 (Premariacco, Juliagraf, 2003).

The Ministry thought it was dangerously close to the Austro-Hungarian border and might, in the event of an enemy invasion, offer an easy and privileged route to access the Po Valley⁷. When Italy entered the war (24 May 1915), the building of the railway became a necessary condition to lighten load of road traffic caused by the imposing amount of supplies required by the Upper Isonzo front. It was strategic because it provided a quick and easy connection between the stores of the 4th Army Corps, situated in the rearguard and therefore in the plain, and Caporetto and the men at the front. The railway had to supply food and munitions to an army of between 100,000 and 135,000 men. About a third of these were engaged in logistic support along the wide area of the rearguard on which Caporetto relied⁸. The town of Cividale was thus the main centre for the distribution of goods sent to the Upper Isonzo front. The newspapers of the time tell us that as many as 6,000 transport vehicles a day were crossing the Ponte del Diavolo, and that this continuous flow of traffic was mostly caused by the railway with a up to thirty trains a day⁹.

The railway line was therefore built at the height of the war, in the winter between 1915 and 1916, along with two other lines that were considered strategic for the front, Villa Santina-Comeglians and Tolmezzo-Paluzza. The line passing through Cividale had to follow the course of the river Natisone. It was built with a narrow gauge of 75 cm, despite the protests of the local authorities who wanted it with an ordinary gauge, as they hoped to be able to use it for civilian purposes once the war was over. Unfortunately their requests were not successful. Work was carried out quickly and the line was already active in 1916. It was perfected in 1917 with the construction of several tunnels (one of which, near Stupizza, is still preserved)¹⁰.

The management of the line was entrusted to the Società Veneta, which assigned to it ten Breda steam locomotives. The line started from the station at Barbeta, about a kilometre east of the Udine-Cividale station, while the terminus was at Susida (Sužid), three kilometres before Caporetto so that the enemy artillery could not damage its structures. Intermediate stations were also built at Sanguarzo, Ponte San Quirino, San Pietro al Natisone, Brischis, Pulfero, Loch, Stupizza, Poiana and Robici. Each station had warehouses and loading ramps for goods, sidings and systems for supplying water to the locomotives; these facilities allowed each station to be a place for both loading and unloading goods¹¹. Of all the stations, Robici was the largest and best equipped. It had large depots and a turntable for the locomotives so that they could be turned for the journey back to Cividale¹².

Unfortunately, with the retreat from Caporetto all the troops were quickly withdrawn from the front and the railway was abandoned to the enemy, with all the rolling stock and structures¹³. It was rapidly reused by the Austro-Hungarians and absorbed in their military railways (K.u.K. Heeresbahn Südwest) where it continued to fulfil its strategic function. At the end of the war the railway returned into the hands of the Italian army, and in 1921 it was extended as far as Caporetto. In the years that followed it was used for the transport of civilians, especially veterans, going to visit the place where they had fought.

⁷ Cf. Marco Montini, *Da Tolmino a Caporetto lungo i percorsi delle Grande Guerra tra Italia e Slovenia*, p. 29, Udine, Gaspari Editore, 2006.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹ Cf. Mario Zerboni, *Le ferrovie di Cividale del Friuli. Un viaggio nella storia*, p. 85, Udine, Forum, 2003.

¹⁰ Cf. Marco Mantini, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31.

¹¹ Cf. Mario Zerboni, *op. cit.*, p. 87. ¹² Cf.

Marco Mantini, *op. cit.*, p. 30. ¹³ Cf.

Mario Zerboni, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

In 1928, on the slopes of Monte Nero, at 2170 metres, a mountain hut had been opened as a monument to the sub-lieutenant of the Alpini, Alberto Picco (Silver Medal for Military Valour); this hut became a place of pilgrimage for many veterans¹⁴. The railway finally closed in 1932 due to the inadequacy of the structures and the continuous growth in the use of motor coaches which took away a lot of its business.

1916

The autumn offensive on the Isonzo had not been successful; between the end of 1915 and the beginning of 1916 it had become urgent to refurbish the infantry and the artillery whose numbers were greatly reduced and all very tired. Munitions were already in short supply and life in the trenches was becoming exhausting.

Since May 1915 and until 1917, Friuli had become the rearguard of the war on the Isonzo, and along the borders the Italian army was viewed as an *invader* due to the mass of people that it mobilised, reaching more than a million soldiers in comparison with the region's 600,000 residents. Strict regulations were issued in 1915 to cope with the consequences of this massive presence of troops. The movements of the resident population closest to the front (and in Friuli in general) were limited and checked, involving sudden changes in daily life and causing damage especially to those engaged in commercial activities.

However, the presence of Italian soldiers in Friuli did have some positive consequences: the military authorities needed civilian workers to be employed as manual labourers in the rearguard, such as the building of bridges and roads, and the maintenance that these structures required¹⁵. This meant that a large number of civilians were employed who otherwise would have had no possibility of finding work to support their families.

In early 1916, Cividale had undergone a considerable transformation: military roads had been built and the existing roads had been enlarged to allow easier transit for all the army's cars and trucks. There were barracks and stables for horses everywhere; lorries loaded with munitions or carrying the wounded drove through the streets and there was an enormous presence of soldiers in the town. Even the shop windows were dressed with objects for military use. The air raids over the town began in those months. On 16 May, at 3.45 in the morning, numerous bombs were dropped on Cividale by Austrian planes, spreading terror and death among the population. The battle lasted an hour and a half. A few days later, on 19 May, more bombs were dropped near the railway station making a hole more than two metres wide and several decimetres deep. Some workers were seriously injured by the debris and bled to death in the Hospital.

There were further air raids and bombing throughout the summer of 1916.

The nuns at the Ursuline Monastery continued to provide assistance to the typhoid cases until September 1916, when the ladies of the Red Cross took over the job.

Mons. Liva had been delegated by Mons. Bartolomasi, Military Bishop for the Cividale area, to care for the souls of the soldiers. He was engaged above all in providing comfort and assistance to the soldiers in the hospitals. He also coordinated all the associations that ensured a Christian presence among the military. In addition, he had passed on to the patients some offers made by the faithful, who wished to remain anonymous, intended for soldiers who were in very poor economic conditions. From the diary of Mons. Liva:

I received a note containing 50 Lire from a person who wished to remain anonymous, asking me to give them to a poor mutilated soldier. Shortly afterwards I received 65 Lire in an envelope with

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁵ Cf. Gustavo Corni, *Storia della società friulana. 1914 – 1925*, p.15, Istituto Friulano per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione, Udine, 2000.

these simple words: for some poor sick or war wounded. In this case too, the generous benefactor preferred to conceal his identity. [...] I cannot express how moved the two brave young men were, and what blessings they sent to the person who had thought of them so generously¹⁶.

Although he was busy helping the soldiers, Mons. Liva never failed to fulfil his duties to the community. On 30 April 1916, it was the date of the yearly pilgrimage from the town of Cividale to the Marian sanctuary at Castelmonte. Since the pilgrimage could not be held due to the outbreak of war, the Monsignor, representing the townspeople and in order to fulfil the vow made in the past for favours received, went up with a number of canons and priests from the town, and the representatives of Cividale's associations. The theme of the Dean's prayer to the Blessed Virgin was essentially to invoke peace among the peoples and the end of the conflict¹⁷. The war had been a heavy burden for the ecclesiastical institutions in Cividale. Many buildings had been requisitioned for military purposes, among them the sacristy, the archive and the rooms where children were instructed in the catechism; Mons. Liva was also very worried about the plan to open new brothels in the town to entertain the soldiers on leave from the front.

SPRING 1916

In February the Austrian army had concentrated 14 divisions in Trentino, which had been transferred from the front of the Isonzo and from the Balkan front. They intended to break through the Italian lines on the west (between Val Lagarina and Val Sugana) and then go down to the plain to surprise the Italians from behind while they were all concentrated in the east on the Isonzo.

The FIFTH battle on the Isonzo began on 11 March and lasted until 19 March without achieving any result.

On 14 May 1916 the Austro-Hungarian army launched an offensive known as the STRAFEXPEDITION. This had been conceived as a *punitive expedition* to punish the Italian betrayal of the Triple Alliance. It was led by General Conrad von Hotzendorf, who commanded 20 Austrian divisions, in the Triangle of Trentino, towards the plateaux in the province of Vicenza.

In Italian history it is known as the BATTLE OF ASIAGO.

In the afternoon of 14 May, artillery fire such as had never been seen before hailed down on the Italian emplacements and, on the morning of 15 May, the 20th Corps of the Austro-Hungarian army attacked the Italian army, making an enemy victory very likely. The attack took the Italian troops by surprise: arranged in defence of the front, they valorously continued to regain any position that was lost, but under enemy pressure they had to begin the retreat.

The Austrians took Asiago on 28 May. In June the Austro-Hungarian troops managed to occupy the mountains of Zugna, Pasubio and the Val Posina, south of the Valsugana, and succeeded in conquering the whole plateau of Asiago.

Although surprised by the events, Cadorna succeeded in taking control of the situation and grouping together a sufficient number of reserve divisions (though removing troops from the Isonzo and running the risk of an enemy offensive) to form the FIFTH ARMY, which succeeded in bringing an end to the Austro-Hungarian offensive on the Plateaux.

Austria was immediately aware of the threat and tried to take a last offensive action, but then, realising that it was impossible to advance, they ceased the offensive and retreated from the lines reached.

On 27 June Italy's first defensive battle ended, which had been very bloody and hectic. Luigi Cadorna had saved his position as Chief of Staff and began to prepare an offensive to the right of the Isonzo and, more precisely, on the town of Gorizia. The plan of attack, conducted with the Duke of Aosta, Emanuele Filiberto, contemplated fierce bombing between Monte Calvario and Monte San Michele, followed by

¹⁶ Cf. Bruno Baccino, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹⁷ *Idem*.

an offensive action to capture some emplacements on the left bank of the Isonzo.

THE TAKING OF GORIZIA

On 29 June, on Monte Calvario, there was an Austrian attack with poison gas which cost the lives of 3,000 soldiers and slowed down the operations of the Third Army on the front. The detachments were reorganised and the necessary measures were taken to deal with another similar event in the future.

There were no important actions until the end of July and all the positions were maintained. An attempt was made to increase the reserves of munitions and related material in view of the offensive to take Gorizia.

In Cividale, in the headquarters of the Command of the Second Army in Palazzo Craighero, the Council of the Army Chiefs met on 30 July to decide on the attack against the imperial defences of Gorizia.

Unfortunately, the air raids on Cividale were continuing: in July, at three in the morning, a bomb fell in the courtyard of the priest Corgnali, and more bombs were dropped the following month, including one in Borgo Brossana.

The SIXTH battle on the Isonzo, known also as the *Battle of Gorizia*, was fought from 6 to 17 August. Unlike the other battles in the Second Army zone, they began with a considerable advantage: in the spring of that year, the 4th Division, under the command of General Luca Montuori and Colonel Pietro Badoglio, had succeeded in advancing to the peak of Monte Sabotino, to the north-east of Gorizia. The sappers worked quickly and in a few months they built various tunnels close to the Austro-Hungarian emplacements.

In the meantime, the Fifth Army divisions that had been moved to Trentino in May 1916 returned to the Carso: they could therefore count on about 200 thousand soldiers, who launched the sixth battle at dawn on 6 August 1916.

The shelling was effective and, at four in the afternoon of the same day, Cadorna ordered some columns of the 45th division led by Badoglio and by the Generals Gagliani and Del Bono to attack on Monte Sabotino. In 40 minutes, backed up by heavy artillery, they reached the peak. Most of the Dalmatian soldiers who were defending the mountain surrendered, while others took refuge in the tunnels which were later set on fire by the Italian soldiers.

A little earlier, at 3.30, the attack on Monte San Michele had begun. The Catanzaro, Brescia and Ferrara brigades succeeded in reaching the peak in a short time, while the Austro-Hungarian soldiers withdrew, waiting for the counterattack at night. However, this was a failure because they were short of reserves, all engaged on Monte Sabotino. On 7 August, all four peaks of San Michele fell under control of the Italian army.

In the area around Gorizia, operations were resumed on 7 August for the Italians to take the town.

The first to enter the town on 8 August were the foot soldiers of the 28th Infantry Pavia, led by the sub-lieutenant Aurelio Baruzzi, Gold Medal for Military Valour. He had obtained permission to swim across the Isonzo to raise the Italian flag on the square in front of the railway station, which became one of the symbols of the taking of Gorizia. On 9 August, Gorizia was finally taken by the Italian army.

Seeing that all the attempts to halt the Italian advance were in vain, the Austrian Command gave orders to withdraw their troops.

A few hours later, in Cividale, a soldier stood up on a chair in the Caffé San Marco and read the bulleting announcing the liberation of Gorizia. The enthusiastic population carried him in triumph through the streets of the town.

On 15 August, in the optimistic climate of the victory in Gorizia, Italy declared war on Germany.

TOWARDS THE END OF 1916

In autumn 1916, the Supreme Command gave orders to pursue the objective of demolishing the lines where the enemy was entrenched. The SEVENTH battle on the Isonzo was thus fought from 14 to 17 September, the EIGHTH battle from 10 to 12 October, and the NINTH battle from 1 to 4 November, where the Italian troops tried, but in vain, to break through the lines of the Habsburg army. The situation remained unchanged for the Royal army, but it weakened the forces, increasing the fatigue and hardship of the troops.

All the actions which historians have called the *breakthroughs of autumn 1916* were suspended. A situation of stagnation and immobility resumed in the trenches, caused also by the winter season and by the impelling need to ration and reorganise the supplies, which had been given out over-generously during the first months of the war.

The material difficulties increased, but the psychological discomfort grew even more.

In all the war zones, as in Cividale too, there was a fall in consumption due both to the lack of offer and to the prices which had become prohibitive, especially on basic goods, due the constant and continuous increase of demand. The situation had aggravated by mid-October; there was a shortage of milk, eggs, coffee and sugar and even petrol, and no lunch was served in the schools because there was no more bread in the bakeries. Compared with the problem of supplies, all other questions took second place. Even the war bulletins reported only minor daily events.]

On 21 November the news of the death of the Emperor Franz Joseph arouse a great deal of interest in Udine. Not so in Cividale, where there were demonstrations against the monarch above all because he was considered to represent *an autocracy in contrast with the times*¹⁸. An enormous puppet appeared in Piazza del Duomo, symbolising Franz Joseph with the gallows.

*At 2 in the afternoon, a committee of townspeople (the lawyers Venturini and Nussi) [...] hung between the two plaques commemorating Victor Emanuel and Garibaldi, on the front of the town hall, a splendid laurel wreath adorned with red carnations and tricolour ribbons with gold fringes, bearing the inscription "To the martyrs of the Austrian gallows – the people of Cividale 21-XI-1916"*¹⁹.

1917. GENERAL SITUATION.

The winter between 1916 and 1917 was one of the harshest since the beginning of the conflict and this certainly did not help to raise the fighting spirit of the troops involved, who were negatively influenced by the news that distressed the civilian populations. The lack of manpower, the need to employ women to do hard work in the factories and other workplaces, the increasing scarcity of food and raw materials, the rapid rise in prices, were all beginning to be felt everywhere. Pacifist propaganda was spreading among the population and the troops, resulting in expressions of insubordination, leading to many cases of attempted desertion and self-inflicted injuries, which the courts tried to suppress with summary trials and in many cases with ruthless severity.

On the moral level, the situation was aggravated both by the bitter disappointment due to the length of the conflict and to the loss of human life, causing feelings of anger, depression, mourning for the dead, fear, panic and anxiety about the prisoners and the missing, of whose fate no news was received. There was a dramatic increase in desertions, which became more serious from the military point of view, and the trials of the deserters; in addition, many residents were not responding to the call to arms.

¹⁸ Cf. Giuseppe Del Bianco, *op.cit.*, vol. II, p.453.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.468.

The pacifist or *defeatist* currents developed in 1917, giving rise to public protests against the government and the politicians. Peace was demanded by the majority of the population, while during the sermons at Mass the people prayed to the Lord that the war would soon end.

1917. THE EVENTS OF WAR.

In the sectors of Monfalcone and the Carso, the situation remained stationary throughout the winter of 1916-1917.

1917 was a critical year for the Entente; the collapse of the Russian front was a severe blow for the allies.

The Russian revolution had broken out and had compromised the fighting spirit of the troops, while on the western front the failure of General Nivelle's offensive had stretched the French forces to the limit resulting in numerous cases of mutiny. The allies therefore asked Italy to intensify its efforts to the highest level, which led to the tenth battle of the Isonzo, in the battle of Ortigara, and the eleventh of the Isonzo, or battle of Bainsizza.

War actions resumed in May 1917: between 12 May and 5 June there was the TENTH offensive on the Carso (Monte Vodice and Kuk), with modest results compared to Cadorna's expectations.

On 10 June an offensive was launched in Trentino to regain some territories that had remained under Austrian control; this culminated in the Battle of Monte Ortigara, which was won on 19 June.

On 25 June, after two weeks of fierce fighting, the Austrians finally thrust back the attacks of the Sixth Army using flamethrowers and gas. The Battle of Ortigara thus became one of the most dramatic pages in the history of the Great War: *in 16 days the Italians lost more than 25 thousand men, and some battalions lost more than 70% of their strength*²⁰.

In the spring months Friuli was constantly under the threat of the planes that flew over the towns of Friuli and the Veneto nearly every day.

Bombs were dropped on Cividale on 11 June; this was one of the most violent raids. Twelve planes of the Austro-Hungarian army, of which five bombers and seven fighters, flew over the town at five in the morning and were seen only when they were right overhead. The bells of the Cathedral rang immediately to give the alarm. Bombs hit the town in various points such as the Museum building, two bombs fell in Largo Boiani, one in Via Patriarcato, one in Via del Paradiso, another in Viale della Stazione. A bomb was dropped on the headquarters of the Catering and Resupply Command in Palazzo Deganutti; then nine more bombs were dropped. The bombing was concentrated on the Campo di Marte and especially the headquarters of the Fourth Truck Battalion. Other bombs were dropped at Rubignacco and in the Natisone. 14 people died and 51 were injured²¹.

Every day, squadrons of planes could be seen flying over several times to mark the positions that could be bombed at night, with the aid of floodlights²².

The raids struck both military and civilian targets indiscriminately.

Mons. Liva sent a message to On. Pecile, asking him to take action with the competent authorities to ensure that signals were given promptly to warn the population of an imminent air raid. This would avoid distressful events, deaths and serious accidents²³.

²⁰ Cf. www.itinerarigrandeguerra.it

²¹ Cf. Giuseppe Del Bianco, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 554.

²² Cf. Maria Agostina Del Negro, *op.cit.*, p.74.

²³ Cf. Bruno Baccino, *op. cit.*, p.157.

THE ELEVENTH BATTLE OF THE ISONZO

The objective of the ELEVENTH BATTLE (18 August – 12 September) was to conquer the Bainsizza Plateau, because it offered the enemy army an excellent starting base for their offensives and provided a natural cover for the Valley of Chiapovano, used by the Austrians to move men and equipment safely between the Carso and the Hollow of Tolmino. The offensive also developed on the Carso and was aided from the sea by monitors²⁴ and ships of the navy. At the cost of great sacrifices, the Italian troops forced the Isonzo in several points and progressed so rapidly along the western edge of the Bainsizza Plateau that the enemy was forced to move farther back, leaving in Italian hands the Jenelik, the Kbilek, Monte Santo, 20,000 prisoners and an enormous quantity of weapons. The total losses in this great battle amounted to 143,000 Italians and 110,000 Austrians, among dead, wounded and missing. After this battle, the Austro-Hungarian army was reduced into such conditions that it could not withstand another Italian attack²⁵.

At the end of the eleventh battle of the Isonzo, the Italian soldiers were exhausted: the war had cost the army an enormous effort. The Austro-Hungarian forces had been put to such a hard test that the High Command of the Empire, realising that they could not withstand another Italian breakthrough on the Isonzo, decided to ask the German ally for help to organise a joint offensive against the north wing of the Italian Second Army (TWELFTH BATTLE OF THE ISONZO) to improve their positions on that front. In the second ten days of September, rumours began to spread among the troops and the population concerning the certainty of an imminent enemy action. This increased the fear and a strong sense of disquiet, but also a strong desire for the hostilities to end soon.

A notice board appeared between Cividale and Caporetto saying *To rent to Austrians in November*²⁶.

On 16 October there were five air raids over Cividale, spreading terror among the population; a few days later, the civilians heard the news that the feared offensive had already started on the section between Tolmino and Gorizia.

THE DEFEAT OF CAPORETTO

On 24 October 1917, the Austro-Germans broke through the Italian lines between Plezzo and Tolmino. There was intense shelling in which new and aggressive chemical gases were used. The Austro-Hungarian and German troops launched an assault. The detachments of the Second Army under General Capello managed to stop the enemy troops on the Rombon and on Monte Nero, but not in the hollow of Plezzo, where gases had been shot that asphyxiated the Italian soldiers.

The German detachments passed the Italian lines in front of Tolmino, going up the course of the Isonzo through the valley to join the detachments arriving from Plezzo.

The enemy army was numerically superior and effectively applied the tactic of infiltration. This upset the Italian troops; they were not accustomed to tactical warfare and had not been commanded effectively.

The news that the front had been breached between Plezzo and Tolmino arrived in a "confused" manner in the towns in the province where the members of the High Command were based, among them Cividale del Friuli.

The next day, 25 October, the Italian defences to the left of the Isonzo gave way, and the Austrian and German troops crossed the river and entered Cividale, the gateway to Friuli. The day was marked by considerable tension; crowds of soldiers arriving, the people terrorised and trying to take flight. In the evening, the High Command had sent all the reserves of the Second Army into the fight, but the result was negative. Cadorna had to order the retreat to the Tagliamento;

²⁴ Warship with high protection, modest draught, modest speed, armed with large-calibre guns and intended for coastal actions (Cf. Lo Zingarelli, *Vocabolario della lingua Italiana*, Bologna, Zanichelli)

²⁵ Cf. www.homolaiicus.com/storia/contemporanea/grandeguerra/isonzo.html

²⁶ Cf. Giuseppe Del Bianco, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 578.

along the way, there were some fierce battles in the rearguard. Some detachments of the Italian army managed to protect the withdrawal of the Third Army which was returning along the roads of Lower Friuli from the Carso.

The withdrawal of the detachments was transformed into a chaotic and disorderly retreat: civilians in flight mixed with the military contingents, as well as soldiers who had been cut off from their own detachments.

There was a mass exodus between 27 and 28 October (some people from Cividale had also escaped in the previous days). The population fled in desperation, on lorries and carts, and everything took place under torrential rain.

THE BATTLE OF CIVIDALE ON 27 OCTOBER 1917

What is now known as the Battle of Cividale was really a series of skirmishes and military manoeuvres between the Italian and the Austro-Hungarian armies in the zone to the north and east of Cividale, where the valley of the Natisone meets the plain of Friuli. Along with the Battle of Codroipo it may be considered the most important battle of the retreat from Caporetto. In the days following 24 October, when the line was broken at Caporetto, the Italian army was reorganising itself in positions farther back in the attempt to contain the enemy advance and allow the large part of the army to take up a position behind the Tagliamento. The military command had ordered some detachments to take up a position on the mountain ridges that closed the narrows of Ponte San Quirino-Azzida, placing themselves to the north on the line that separates the valley of the Natisone from that of the Torreano, on Monte dei Bovi and the mountains Mladasena and Spignon (Jonio and Avellino brigades), while, to the south, the troops were relocated on the high land separating the zone of Cividale from the valley of the Judrio, that is on Monte Purgessimo, Castelmonte (Jonio, Avellino and Ferrara brigades) and on Monte Spig towards Stregna (Elba, Taro, Spezia, Milano and Puglie brigades)²⁷. At 3.50 a.m. on 27 October, before leaving Udine, the High Command gave orders to move all that was left of these brigades to these strategic points to slow down the enemy advance. It had been established that each Army Corps would leave 10 battalions on the new defence line that was forming, from Lusevera, Pujak, Le Zuffine, Joanaz, Mladasena, Purgessimo, Castelmonte, Korada, Sabotino, Salcano, Gorizia. It was a case of resisting to the bitter end²⁸. The military intent was to gain time, to create a line of pause, that is to allow the Second, the Fourth and what was left of the Fourth Army to take cover behind the river Torre, where the rearguard left on the Cividale line would be positioned²⁹. When this became the new front line, the rest of the army would withdraw behind the river Tagliamento which had swollen due to the rain that had fallen in those days³⁰ and therefore provided an excellent defence barrier against the enemy. In fact it became an all-out defence line. Despite their inferior numbers and poor equipment (they had no cannons but only machine guns) and few munitions, the brigades succeeded in holding back the advance of five Austro-Hungarian divisions for almost the whole day³¹. There was a shortage of supplies on the various sectors of the line. Cadorna had given orders that the munitions should be carried in the withdrawal column, behind the trucks of supplies and baggage. This meant that nearly all the detachments on the withdrawal line were left without supplies, especially the machine gun companies³². This sentenced the soldiers' last stand to failure and was perhaps one of the mistakes that the High Command made during the retreat from Caporetto.

²⁷ Cf. AA.VV., *Guida ai luoghi grande guerra. 3. Gli itinerari*, p. 138-139, Udine, Gaspari Editore, 2012.

²⁸ Cf. Paolo Gaspari, *Le termopili italiane: la battaglia di Cividale del 27 ottobre 1917*, p.12, Udine, Gaspari Editore, 2007.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13

³⁰ Cf. Giuseppe Del Bianco, *op.cit.*, vol. III p.177.

³¹ From the site www.lagrandeguerra.info/articoli.php?i=35

³² Cf. Paolo Gaspari, *op. cit.*, p.15.

The Italian defence line had not been organised with a rearguard, with a sufficient depth to hold back the enemy in the event of the line being broken, and this was the other reason why the Austro-Hungarian army broke through the Cividale line so easily. The retreat had been badly planned and badly managed, so its outcome could only have been a failure³³. The brigades engaged in containing the enemy offensive were mostly reserves; they were brigades that had been waiting to be reformed after the losses suffered on the Bainsizza plateau. Half of them were replacements or reserves and there were no regulars (the only ones who had any experience of combat) because they were nearly all on leave. There was a front 50 kilometres long to be defended to the last, with inexperienced and badly equipped soldiers and no second lines. This front that was to have been a pause line, to hold back the enemy momentarily and allow the army to get reorganised behind the river Torre, became what Cadorna called a line of ultimate defence³⁵:

*This line must be defended to the last man. Giving way would mean opening the doors to the invasion. On this line we must win or die*³⁶.

The Austro-Hungarian offensive began during the night between 26 and 27 October. On 26 October the Italians had abandoned the narrows of Stupizza, leaving fire and devastation behind them, by order of the High Command, so that the enemy would find nothing usable³⁷.

At 5.30 the Austro-Hungarians launched an attack to conquer Monte Joanaz, above Torreano, while the other detachments headed south, along the ridge that led to the opening of Ponte San Quirino. By 8.30 Monte dei Bovi was already in enemy hands, while the Mladasena was conquered towards midday³⁸. Almost simultaneously, other detachments had launched the attack on Monte di Purgessino, Castelmonte and Monte Spig. The first two, after a strenuous Italian resistance were conquered only in the early afternoon³⁹. The day before, 26 October, the German detachments had broken through to the east of the Matajur where they had taken up a position in the narrows of Luico (Livek) and conquered the Kolovrat⁴⁰. Passing through Cepletischis and Savogna they had arrived at Azzida.

During the night the Austro-Hungarians managed to conquer S. Pietro and, towards two in the morning, they arrived at the opening of the Natisone valley and tried to take Azzida and Monte di Purgessimo, where the Italians had formed an emplacement in the meantime.

*gunfire could be heard and we could see flashes of our own and the enemy's fire*⁴¹.

The first direct attack on the town had already taken place at 5.30 in the afternoon of the 26th, by the divisions arriving from Luico. Surrounded on two sides, the Italian soldiers resisted for the whole of the next morning; by 2 in the afternoon they were exhausted and had to withdraw first towards the bridge of San Quirino, which had already been blown up⁴³. There they could not hold out for long, as they were under fire from the enemy divisions that in the meantime had taken up position of Monte dei Bovi, from which they could strike the whole plain below with their mortars. They then withdrew to Monte di Purgessimo where they joined the other Italian brigades⁴⁴. The same Austro-Hungarian divisions that had overcome them at Azzida then directed their attack on Castelmonte and Monte di Purgessimo where our men were positioned.

³³ Ibid., p.14.

³⁴ Ibid., p.22-23.

³⁵ Ibid., p.25.

³⁶ Ibid., p.28.

³⁷ Cf. Del Bianco, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pg 177.

³⁸ Cf. Paolo Gaspari, *op. cit.*, p.440.

³⁹ Ibid., p.39.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.57.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.61.

⁴² Ibid., p.93-94.

⁴³ Ibid., p.109.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.106.

Going up from San Leonardo they arrived first at Monte Cum, above Tribil, then advanced along the ridge and headed towards Purgessimo. Our men resisted in these emplacements until the evening of 27 October, when they had to withdraw. From there, some went down to Cividale and were taken prisoner; others took the road towards Prepotto, managing to precede the enemy troops who were going down the Judrio valley, and found safety in the plain towards Manzano. In the afternoon the 14th Reserjaeger regiment had succeeded in arriving in Cividale and occupying the town, since our men had left the San Quirino narrows free. The town was kept constantly under enemy fire through the night. The Command in Cividale had ordered the young officer of the Engineer Corps Francesco Giorgi to blow up the tracks of the railway station and the bridge over the Natisone as soon as the enemy arrived in the town, to slow down their advance; other officers had been ordered to set fire to the deposits. As a result, due to the damage ordered by our own army and to the fires caused by the enemy bombs, from afar it seemed that "all Cividale was burning like a huge furnace". The Empire troops, having gone down towards Prestento, had taken up a position on Monte dei Bovi during the night and next morning they began to shell the town centre. In the meantime the Italian soldiers had begun to retreat, some by train, others later on foot towards Udine. Around 10 in the morning the last members of the Catering and Resupply Command left Cividale, while on the Zuccola hill nearby the Italians were responding to the fire of the enemy on Monte dei Bovi⁴⁵. At 3.45 in the afternoon the first Empire soldiers entered the town finding only slight resistance from the engineer corps, who were preparing to blow up the bridge over the Natisone. It was blown up a few minutes later. The shooting stopped and the plundering of Cividale began. The poor inhabitants could do nothing against the unruly soldiers who had now invaded the whole of the town. They had to stand by helplessly while the enemy smashed their doors and windows and broke everything they could find as they searched for valuables or anything useful, and this was done "with such clashing and banging that it sounded like a terrible new bombing"⁴⁶.

CIVIDALE DURING THE YEAR OF THE OCCUPATION

Cadorna conducted the retreat from the Piave in very critical conditions due to poor roads, an enemy army on his heels, and roads crowded with hundreds of thousands of soldiers mixed with fleeing civilians. The Italian army had lost about 40,000 men between dead and wounded, 280,000 had been captured and there were 350,000 disbanded in flight in the rearguard.

The Italian armed forces were on their knees and the country had been invaded and occupied by the enemy.

The command of the Royal army was entrusted to Armando Diaz.

Since the end of October 1917, the war had revealed its most dramatic face to the people of Friuli. An occupying army arrived, speaking languages that no one understood⁴⁷, and the people of Cividale, but especially of Friuli, had to decide whether to leave or stay, facing the consequence of living with the enemy.

Out of a total population of 630,000 inhabitants (figures from the last census, taken in 1911), 135,000 refugees left Friuli. Cividale had 10,000 inhabitants, of which 5,177 left.

Florence took in 17,500 people from Friuli, among them many professional persons and notables. The Ministry of the Interior designated Florence as the headquarters of the Prefecture of Udine and, as a result, all the offices of the Commissioner for the province, the municipalities and the other local authorities were also established there; around them several administrative and political circles were also regrouped. They organised committees, administrations and legally recognised bodies.

⁴⁵ Cf. Giuseppe Del Bianco, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 183.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁴⁷ Cf. Bonassi, Fabi, Martina, Viola, *Il Friuli del '15/'18*, Udine, Provincia di Udine, 2003, p. 145.

In the Tuscan capital, the most important notables became national figures of reference for the people of Friuli. They set up administrations and legally recognised bodies, managed assistance programmes, and requests for subsidies with an eye to their constituencies, and of course did not fail to come into conflict with the administrations imposed by the Austro-German military government.⁴⁸

At the moment of the Austro-German invasion, the people of Friuli found themselves in a chaotic situation: flight could not have been easy for the ordinary people because, to clear the roads, both the retreating and the advancing troops would overturn the carts and household goods of the fleeing civilians at the sides of the roads and in the ditches. In many cases their headlong flights were interrupted by an order from the military, by the crowded roads or by a broken bridge. Fear, fatigue and the impossibility of going any farther were the major causes that forced many civilians to return to their homes, often after having travelled along terrifying roads in the rain and cold. The number of families who wanted to leave was considerably greater than those who actually managed to cross the line. Another bitter truth was that most of the population was caught completely off guard by the advance, and could no more than stand by and watch as the new occupying force arrived. Instead, in the rural and mountain areas, the great majority of the farming population did not want to abandon their homes and adjoining stables or their land, as those were their only resources. In a great many cases, the deep-rooted peasant culture rebelled against the impositions and the invitations from the military authorities to leave and any, when they could, escaped the displacement measures.

Faced with the practically complete flight of the local authorities, the local members of the ecclesiastic authority chose to remain with their parishioners who had decided to remain in Friuli. The clergy were put to a very hard test; those who had chosen to stay had done so of their own free will, according to their conscience.

The “Personal state of the Clergy” of 1914, the last official document before the rout of Caporetto, indicated the following structure for the Archdiocese of Udine, counting the diocesan clergy alone: 678 priests, 27 deans and 232 parishes, deaneries and independent chaplaincies.⁴⁹

It was led by His Eminence Monsignor Antonio Anastasio Rossi who had been appointed Bishop in May 1910.

The abundance of clergy allowed the Diocese to offer a pastoral service on the spot nearly everywhere, as the region was characterised by small town scattered all over the territory.

Of these 678 priests, 600 spontaneously decided to remain in Friuli close to their parishioners.

Life in Cividale del Friuli, during the occupation, has been documented by the writings of Monsignor Valentino Liva, the Dean of the Chapter of Cividale. He remained close to his people who had stayed in town, dealing with bureaucratic and administrative matters and assistance.

Every day, Mons. Liva painstakingly recorded all that happened in Cividale from the first days of the exodus, from 27 October 1917 for a whole year until the Liberation on 4 November 1918. In 1918, his records were published in two volumes entitled *The life of a people* and *A year of imprisonment*, printed by the printers F.lli Stagni in Cividale del Friuli.

From Mons. Liva’s memoirs, we learn that on the morning of 27 October 1917 there were only one hundred people in Cividale, including some soldiers of the Engineer Corps.

⁴⁸ Cf. Lucio Fabi, Giacomo Viola, *Il Friuli nella Grande Guerra. Memorie, documenti, problemi*, Edizioni del centro polivalente del monfalconese, Progetto Integrato Cultura Medio Friuli, Ronchi dei Legionari, 1996, p. 48.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Stato personale e locale del Clero della Città ed Arcidiocesi di Udine per l’anno 1914*, Stabilimento Tipografico S. Paolino, Udine, 1913, p.169-185.

He tells us of an episode that occurred near the bridge that had been blown up by the Italian troops, in the attempt to slow down the advance of the Austro-Hungarian army.

Hearing groans, the priests approached and saw a young officer and a soldier who had been injured while blowing up the bridge. The officer was Gian Francesco Giorgi from Modena who, with the soldier, was taken immediately to hospital where he died in the first days of December.

The Officer Giorgi was awarded the posthumous Silver Medal, thanks to Mons. Liva's account of his heroic action.

At the end of October, Mons. Liva received a decree from Udine, with which the Pro-Vicar General of the Diocese of Udine appointed him Dean Pro-Vicar for the District of Cividale, San Pietro al Natisone, Corno di Rosazzo and Nimis.

The Dean also became Mayor of Cividale during the year of occupation.

He immediately set to work to create a committee providing assistance to the people who had remained in the town, and always acted as intermediary between the population and the foreign military Command.

In early November some people returned to the town, along with disbanded soldiers who had escaped from concentration camps.

The Town Major, von Below, feared that some residents might take in the prisoners who had escaped from the camps, and issued orders threatening that anyone who helped the fugitives would face the firing squad; the escaped prisoners would share the same fate.

Mons. Liva and his fellow priests secretly gave hospitality to the soldiers, then sent them to parish priests in the mountains⁵⁰.

Mon's Liva's biggest worry concerned supplies to ensure the survival of the people of Cividale. He sent many requests to the commanders of the occupying forces, but never received any reply. To cope with the emergency, he decided to create the Town Council chaired by himself, and appointed other people as councillors and secretaries. Other leaders were created in the hamlets.

The new administration tried to obtain what was necessary for the basic needs of the families, and to solve the tragic problem of the prisoners: there were various concentration camps near Cividale.

Another problem was assisting the sick and wounded.

On 31 October, a small group of Ursuline nuns had left for the seminary at Rubignacco, which had been converted into a military hospital, to care for the Italian soldiers abandoned by the Germans.

Ever since the first days of the invasion the German Command had expressed the intention to take over the Town Hospital.

The Administration was unable to oppose this, and so the Town Hospital was at the disposal of the wounded of the Austro-Hungarian and German armies; it also became the headquarters of the General Management of all the hospitals in the town.

In the meantime the numbers of sick and wounded were decreasing in all the military hospitals in Cividale, due to the distance from the front.

From the first days after the occupation, goods were requisitioned from every home, spoiling them and looting everything that could be found, household linen, furnishings, and taking away any animals left.

From 27 October 1917 the Poiana aqueduct supplied no more water to Cividale or the other municipalities belonging to the Consortium. This was due to the explosion of a mine during the retreat, which crushed the pipeline near the place where water was drawn, and caused the breakage of other pipes.

⁵⁰ Cf. Bruno Baccino, *op.cit.*, p. 161-162.

The population had only well water to rely on but it was risky because there was a great danger of epidemics; in addition, the firefighting service could not be guaranteed⁵¹.

A large warehouse had been in operation in Cividale since November 1917. It distributed food supplies, trying to help the population as much as possible.

The situation was aggravated near Christmas time. Drunken soldiers were roaming through the streets of the town, terrifying the people, and carrying out thefts that were becoming more and more frequent.

Mons. Liva pointed out what was happening in Cividale in many protest letters sent to the Austrian Command, asking them to forward the communications to the High Command.

At the end of 1917, Cividale was in a situation of total isolation, completely under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian and Germany armies. Despite their growing despair, the population had a great desire to receive correspondence from those who had managed to flee.

1918

Since the Austro-Hungarian occupation, Friuli had been under the authority of the forces of the south-western front, led by the Archduke Eugen, who in December of the same year had to issue orders to stop the looting and violence perpetrated by the invading army at the expense of the population.

In January 1918 the Command of the south-western front was dissolved and Friuli passed under the Group of Armies of Field Marshal Svetozovar Boroévic von Bojna. Boroévic was a Croat by nationality, faithful to the Habsburg monarchy. The area under his power included not only Friuli, but also the occupied territory on the Piave, with the exception of the mountain area as far as Monte Grappa.

District Commands were set up as initial administrative authorities which depended on the Chief of Staff; sixteen district commands were created in the territory administered by Boroévic.

The district command of Cividale was created for the districts of Cividale and San Pietro al Natisone⁵².

There was often ill-feeling between Boroévic's soldiers and the Germans; there were many complaints about the behaviour of the German troops, who caused fear among the population especially during their requisitions.

The massive presence of soldiers began to weigh heavily on the conditions of food supplies; there was also great disorder, as the troops frequently did not obey orders.

From the first days of the occupation, the people's agricultural products were requisitioned, with supplies of food, animals and clothing. The violent and cruel plundering by the enemy continued until the end of the First World War. As well as holding a census of the population, the invading army had compiled special lists of landowners and their tenant farmers.⁵³

⁵¹ Cf. Claudio Mattaloni, *Grupignano. Storia, cronaca, e tradizioni di un borgo rurale friulano*, Udine, Arti Grafiche Friulane, 1989, p. 112.

⁵² Cf. Christine Horvath – Mayerhofer, (a cura di Arturo Toso), *L'Amministrazione militare austro – ungarica nei territori occupati dall'ottobre 1917 al novembre 1918*, Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano Comitato di Udine, Udine, 1985, p. 24 – 25.

⁵³ Cf. Gian Francesco Cromaz, *Memorie dell'occupazione austro – germanica nei comuni del Distretto di Udine. (Autunno 1917-Autunno 1918)*, Comune di Basiliano, 1998, p. 15.

Supplies of wheat and maize flour were also confiscated, allowing a daily ration of 200 grams per person, which was reduced to 150 grams in January 1918. In the same month vegetables, potatoes, wine, oil, seeds, fodder and fruit were confiscated, as well as pigs, sheep, goats and poultry. The weekly meat ration allowed 500 grams per head at the start, which was then reduced to 200 grams; slaughtering was therefore regulated accordingly. A special ration card, valid for three months, was issued for buying bread.

The efforts made by the Commission in charge of supplies and by the Municipal Administration of Cividale were accompanied by the help of the inhabitants, who defended the things they still possessed with all their might, to try to help those who had nothing.

Potatoes and vegetables should have made up for the shortage of bread, but the harvest of these farm products was poor that year. Further rules and impositions were issued for 1918. The notification of the "Wirtschaftsektion" (economic section) No. 8500/7 of the Austro-Hungarian High Command established that all that had already been produced should be requisitioned, but also all that was still to be harvested. The people began to get organised and to rebel against these restrictions, especially when it was prohibited to grind corn, the mills were closed and armed guards were placed at the doors.

The requisitions of goods and cattle continued throughout the year, as the conditions of provisions were precarious, but all the goods were also taken from the warehouse depots. As the military situation became more difficult for Austro-Germans, the prohibitions and the orders issued became more severe.

While requisitions increased, in the last period wool and horsehair mattresses were confiscated (in exchange the people received vegetable horsehair mattresses and a small compensation in cash), and there was a drastic reduction in food rations. The enemy troops also requisitioned linen sheets and all other kinds of fabric, even taking women's petticoats.

The farmers craftily tried to hide part of the harvest and other products for their own use. Their farms were searched and they were threatened with severe punishments and sanctions; they could be fined as much as 5,000 Lire or imprisoned for six months; fortunately these checks were performed haphazardly.

In June 1918 the daily ration of maize flour per person in the Udine District fell to 115 grams, with the intention of reducing it even further to 100 grams.

Due to the increased harshness of food rationing, a black market for food products was established which the invading army was unable to eliminate; throughout the period of the occupation there were many black marketeers dealing in foodstuffs, including some shopkeepers who sold their goods at exorbitant prices.

Another theft that the people of Friuli feared was the requisition of the bells. In every village in Friuli, the Austro-Hungarian troops confiscated bells from the bell-towers and all kinds of bells, to cast the bronze and use the metal. This was another harsh blow for the inhabitants, as the bells were the symbol of the community.

⁵⁴ Cf. Giulia Sattolo, Degree thesis, *Come finì la Prima Guerra Mondiale attraverso i diari parrocchiali*, Udine, 2010, p.16.

For each bell taken, the Austro-Hungarian army should have paid a certain number of tokens as compensation for the damage suffered. Unfortunately, this procedure was hardly ever applied. This sad state of affairs also affected Cividale.

On 29 May, the bells of all the bell-towers in Cividale were requisitioned, except those of the Duomo. For many months Mons. Liva had been carefully considering the news that arrived from Lower Friuli concerning the requisition of the bells. He intervened with the Austrian and German Commands of the zone, in his dual capacity as Mayor and Dean of the Chapter, asking for the bells to be spared, and especially those of the Duomo. He was assured that no bells would be requisitioned, and that all places of worship would be respected.

But that was not to be. On 3 July 1918 the Germans took down the four biggest bells from the bell-tower of the Duomo and took them away on Sunday 7 July, while Mass was being celebrated⁵⁵.

THE POSTAL SERVICE

The functioning of the postal service was another serious problem that worried all the parish priests in the district. They were in charge of sorting both incoming and outgoing letters. The correspondence had increased so much that the inhabitants of the invaded territory were asked to limit their letters and postcards to twice a month. In particular there had been an increase in the correspondence with the exiles who were in the rest of Italy, both from the people of Cividale asking for news of their loved ones in other regions and from refugees asking not only for news of their relatives and friends, but for information about the condition of their homes.

THE NEW BRIDGE

During the sad period of the Austro-Hungarian occupation there was also an important and joyful day for the population: the inauguration of the new bridge.

After having made a temporary walkway over the bridge, the town council asked General Eltz to have the built rebuilt in the shortest time possible.

A team of builders and stonemasons was formed, residing between Cividale and Torreano, who immediately set to work. On 18 May 1918, at 9 in the morning, the solemn benediction of the new bridge was held in the presence of all the authorities, including Commandant Boroévic who, however, left for Udine immediately after the ceremony.

THE FINAL STAGE OF THE WAR

The last months of 1918 were filled with exasperation and distress for the population; the people were exhausted, the food had all been requisitioned and restrictions were increasing every day. The houses were destroyed and all their remaining contents taken away, such as the doors, the windows and even the beams.

Winter was approaching and the people feared that they would not survive if they had to put up with continuous harassment and deprivation.

Needing food, the enemy troops would go and wake the parish priests in the middle of the night. They would appear at the door of the parsonage, threatening the priests with their bayonets, and in just a few moments broke into the house and took away all kinds of foodstuffs and anything else that might be useful and necessary for survival. In other situations, which by now seemed to have become a custom, many parish priests found the Austro-Hungarian troops encamped in the courtyard of the parsonage, eating.

The parsonages were stripped of their furnishings and seriously damaged before being abandoned.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bruno Baccino, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

In some cases, as on 17 September 1918 in Cividale, gendarmes and officers entered the Duomo to requisition all the pipes of the large organ. They were confiscated without giving any compensation in cash or tokens, and even the last bells that remained were taken away.

In some municipalities, the military authorities ordered the families to hand over all their livestock, but there were no animals left in the stables because they had already been confiscated. The other orders given, or rather, the other confiscations made at the end of October 1918 regarded the forced handing over of jackets, skirts, underwear and other clothing; in this case too, the people tried to hide as many clothes as they possibly could. The people lived in a constant nightmare of requisitions and searches because, if the Austro-Hungarian military authorities were not given what they asked for, they were quite likely to break violently into people's homes.

During the raids, the enemy troops would break down doors or gates, entering the house at dead of night; they would steal flour, maize and polenta, beating or threatening the people, even burning buildings and stealing the clothes people were wearing in the street.

The plundering ceased only when the Armistice was confirmed⁵⁶.

Between summer and autumn 1918, the people of Friuli began to hear the first confused and fragmentary news about the battles on the Piave, telling of the attacks by the Italians and the collapse of the Austrian army.⁵⁷ This information was recorded in their diaries by the parish priests, who began to express the first cautious feelings of hope for an imminent end to the war.

The Austrian troops always tried to remain solid and compact but, from the end of September there was increasing discord among the different peoples that composed the Habsburg Empire; now exhausted, Turkey and Bulgaria were asking for negotiations to end the war.

Just then General Diaz decided to launch a great offensive that had been meticulously planned and began on 24 October (the anniversary of Caporetto). In the space of a few days it broke through the Austrian front at Vittorio Veneto and resulted in the hasty retreat of the enemy, which was transformed into a defeat.

After 29 October the situation began to precipitate for the detachments of the Austro-Hungarian army at the front. Many units of the enemy army refused to go to the front, while other units set off on their own initiative for their homelands, starting from the Hungarian troops who, until then, had been the best of the Empire. There was a growing refusal to the orders given and an increased desire for rebellion; this led to a general disintegration⁵⁸. The Hungarian army's rejection of combat because a real insurrection, as happened at Billerio, near Tarcento, on 27 October 1918, the so-called "Revolt of Artegna".

Faced with the horrors of war, the parish priests had no other weapon but faith and consolation. The last days of October and the beginning of November were marked by the expectation of the arrival of the Italian army. The parish priests were a great comfort to the faithful, who were frightened, shocked and disheartened, with no more hope of an end to the war.

⁵⁶ Cf. Giulia Sattolo, *op. cit.*, p. 49,50, 57.

⁵⁷ Cf. G. Viola, *L'Arcidiocesi di Udine*, p. 177, in Gustavo Corni, *op. cit.*.

⁵⁸ Cf. Mario Isnenghi – Giorgio Rochat, *La Grande Guerra.1914-1918*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 2000, p.462.

When the news finally began to go round that the Austrian army was withdrawing and the Italian troops were about to reach Friuli, there was a real hope that the war was at last coming to an end.

Between the end of October and the first days of November, it could be seen that the war was taking a new direction; Italian planes flew over the towns dropping notes with expressions of hope and trust. Despite this, there was still no reliable news of the imminent arrival of Italian troops, and the whole population was anxiously wondering when they would arrive. Mons. Liva's rectory was constantly invaded by his parishioners.

On 3 November, at Villa Giusti, near Padua, a few hours after the Italian army had entered Trento and the Italian fleet had landed its units in Trieste, Austria was obliged to sign the Armistice. This would come into force the next day, after 3 p.m.

In the early afternoon of 3 November, towards 2 p.m., near Udine, the first group of Italian cavalry entered the town.⁵⁹

At the same time, in Cividale, Don Valentino Liva and the faithful of the community were awaiting the now imminent arrival of the Italian army.

As soon as I had finished my spiritual duties in the Duomo, I ran to my friends; because we all had to be in our place of vigilance amidst the dangers of the enemy retreat. At 7 I went out into the outskirts. Still no sign of Italian troops in the vicinity. At Rubignacco, two milkmen asked me anxiously, "When are they coming?" "Soon; but keep back because it's dangerous now" [...] I recommended everyone, especially young men, to keep well away from the enemy troops.⁶⁰

On 4 November, General Diaz made a proclamation to the Nation, announcing victory.

Towards midday, the bicycle troops of the Bersaglieri were the first to enter Cividale. The bridge was packed with people crying *Viva l'Italia!* and waving the tricolour flag, while the Austrians were hiding to avoid capture.⁶¹

At that moment, Mons. Liva was returning to Cividale and on the way he met Signor Milani, who told him that the soldiers were in Piazza del Duomo. He began to run and reached them in Piazza Patriarcato, where there was a general jubilation. The rest of the troops arrived around 1.15 in the afternoon.

Cividale was Italian again⁶².

At 1.15 the glorious Italian cavalry and artillery arrived amidst the joy and exaltation of the people who had flocked to Piazza del Duomo: God be praised! Honour to the victorious army!⁶³

At 4 p.m. Mons. Liva celebrated a solemn Mass in the Duomo.

At 4 p.m. with our soldiers and our people all in the church: in that moment the most harmonious Te Deum, quivering with faith, love and new life from our grief-stricken souls arose triumphantly to Heaven.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Cf. Tiziano Tessitori, *Il Friuli alla fine della guerra 1915-18*, in *Memorie storiche forogiuliesi*, Vol. XLVIII 1967-1968, Udine, 1968, p.5.

⁶⁰ Cf. Valentino Liva, *Un anno di prigionia*, in *La vita di un popolo durante l'occupazione straniera. 27 ottobre 1917 – 4 novembre 1918*, Tipografia Fratelli Stagni, Cividale del Friuli, 1928-1929, p.269.

⁶¹ Cf. Maria Agostina Del Negro, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶² Cf. Bruno Baccino, *op.cit.*, p.176-177.

⁶³ Cf. Valentino Liva, *op.cit.*, p.271-272.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.272.

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