

INTRODUCTION: THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE ISONZO FRONT

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Abstract: One of the greatest, most tragic, and largely overlooked campaigns during the First World War was the Isonzo Front, which ran through an area inhabited by an ethnic Slovenian majority and, in the part along the southern reaches of the Isonzo River, by Italians, Friulians, and Germans. The region was part of the pact between the Triple Entente and Italy, which declared war on Austria-Hungary in 1915. This was a territory that is believed to have been visited by Dante Alighieri and that was described by Ernest Hemingway in one of his novels. This issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* is dedicated to the First World War – specifically, the use and production of cultural heritage during that period – with an emphasis on a lesser-known front in the “non-West”. According to John R. Schindler, the reasons for neglecting and forgetting this front, which involved over a million soldiers, over 300,000 of whom were killed in battle, lie in the fact that “[f]or most English-language historians, battles and campaigns of the Great War that did not happen on the Western Front or involve English-speaking troops apparently are not worth exploring” (Schindler 2001: xiii). Consequently, all the horrors of war and human victims have also been forgotten alongside it. The area that became part of Italy after the war has become the subject of various heritage discourses, strategies, and practices of the winners (i.e., Italians) and the losers (i.e., non-Italians).

Keywords: Caporetto, cultural heritage, Great War, Hemingway, Isonzo Front, landscape, memorials, memories, monuments

Between 2014 and 2018, many events took place in Europe in connection with the hundredth anniversaries of the First World War: the anniversary of its beginning triggered by the assassination in Sarajevo, commemorated in 2014;

the anniversary of Italy entering the war on the English and French side, commemorated in 2015; the anniversary of the US entering the war, commemorated in 2017; and the centenary of the end of the war in 2018. The available online information on books and websites discussing this topic largely depends on or is defined by the country or region from which the inquiry is made, and it partly also depends on whether the search string used is “Great War” or “First World War”. In the English-speaking context, the starting point is the Balkans, also referred to as “the powder keg of Europe”, and the main emphasis is on the Western Front and the British and French victims. At the same time, it is also true that more substantial commemoration first began on the Western Front, by erecting churches and memorials immediately after the war (e.g., in Ypres), and that one of the first commemorative and symbolically reconciliatory ceremonies took place in 1984 between François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl¹ at the site of the Battle of Verdun, where around 300,000 soldiers were killed on both sides.

One of the greatest, most tragic, and largely overlooked campaigns during the First World War was the Isonzo Front, which ran through an area inhabited by an ethnic Slovenian majority and, in the part along the southern reaches of the Isonzo River, by Italians, Friulians, and Germans. The region was part of the negotiations and the agreement between the Triple Entente and Italy, which declared war on Austria-Hungary in 1915.² Legend has it that this territory was visited by Dante Alighieri (Kozorog 2012), and because of this alone it was considered part of the Italian territorial horizon in Italian public discourse, which is also testified to by one of the tragic heroes in Hemingway’s novel *A Farewell to Arms*, who perceives the region as a part of Italia, that will “return to the splendors of Rome” (Hemingway 2014 [1929]: 102).

According to John R. Schindler, the reasons for neglecting and forgetting this front, which involved over a million soldiers, over 300,000 of whom were killed in battle, lie in the fact that “for most English-language historians, battles and campaigns of the Great War that did not happen on the Western Front or involve English-speaking troops apparently are not worth exploring. Thus the Isonzo, the worst campaign of the First World War, not to mention one of the most historically significant, has been forgotten” (Schindler 2001: xiii). All the horrors of war and human victims were also forgotten along with it.

The oblivion on the side of historians is defied by the literary experience provided by Ernest Hemingway in his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, which is one of the first generally known associations that people make with the developments that took place on the Isonzo Front from 1915 to 1917. On the one hand, the persuasiveness of the novelist, a Nobel prizewinner, makes it possible to identify very diverse ways in which individuals experienced the war and, on

the other, it deceives the reader into believing that the literary hero and the writer are one and the same person. What occurs is what Hemingway himself describes as the power of absolute truth that can be provided by a good writer. When comparing what really happened and what is believed to have happened, the latter is much more convincing and thus the reader ascribes what a literary character did, was doing, or experienced to the writer himself. His story about someone else becomes an autobiography to the reader.

The reader can get an idea of what Hemingway experienced and where he was during that period, but in any case his direct language, which combines the journalistic or *Kansas City Star* “staccato style” with a naturalistic literary style, makes the experiences of his literary hero, *Tenente* (Lieutenant) Frederic Henry, on the Isonzo Front from mid-1916 to 1917 or up to the Battle of Caporetto tangible and realistic. In this twelfth battle of the Isonzo, the Austro-Hungarian and German troops pushed the Italians beyond the Piave River and the Italians returned to their old and new positions only at the end of 1918. In a way, this involves narrative “objectivity” that prevails over subjectivity and at the same time does not allow or permit moral judgments. However, this play of different views and premises also has room for approaching reality, and for “detachment”, “the truth”, and “legend”.

In the journal *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, mention must by all means be made of at least one legend created by combining stories, various time periods, and spaces. In a BBC TV documentary about Hemingway’s travels and activities, Michael Palin defined this technique as a combination of “romance and reality”, in which anything is possible. And so, the first legend, according to which the story of Hemingway’s main hero, *Tenente*, is actually the life story of Hemingway himself, also gives birth to other legends. One of the more extraordinary ones says that he was wounded on the Isonzo Front and treated at Hiša Franko. This legend is also included in the presentation of Hiša Franko, one of the best Slovenian and European restaurants. When reading about the restaurant and the Kobarid Museum, what the reader constantly has before the eyes is the famous writer and Nobel prizewinner and not the eighteen-year-old that was delivering chocolate and cigarettes in Fossalta di Piave, a town over a hundred kilometers from the Isonzo Front, and was hit by trench mortar shell in July 1918 – that is, when the Isonzo Front was already over.

The fact that Ernest Hemingway only came to this area at least one year after the events described in his novel inspired a thorough geographical and historical analysis of the work by Branko Drekonja and Aleksander Jankovič Potočnik (2012). The fact that the novel was overly accurate on the one hand and overly vague on the other suggests that it was most likely also created with the help of the informant from the field and that it was completed after 1927,

when Hemingway visited the area. At that point this territory was already part of Italy, which had Italianized the names of settlements and people as part of its fascist policy. Thus, despite the fact that the fascist regime did not accept the novel that is in many ways anti-war text, and did not permit its translation, this exceptional work about the Isonzo Front implicitly affirms the neocolonial concept to some extent.

But what are the Isonzo Front, Hemingway, memorials, nature, music, and cultural heritage doing in this issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, dedicated to the Great War? Because of its title and subject matter alone, the journal is a metaphor for both the imagination, which creates and enriches tradition, and tradition, which stimulates imagination; the interplay of both makes it possible to become familiar with and use heritage. Within this context, the use and production of heritage with regard to the First World War, to which the articles in this issue are dedicated, are likewise part of the discourse about imaginations and concrete practices and strategies. At the same time, the articles in this issue are dedicated to a special, tragic, and forgotten territory (cf. Štepec 2018). In this thematic issue,³ the Isonzo Front and the developments taking place on this front and in connection with it form a chronotopic basis and background for discussions on cultural heritage, perception, and reception from various research premises that seek to provide traces (Ginzburg 2012) and at the same time testify to the ambivalence and polyvalence of the research object or subject itself.

In the introductory article, “The Experience and Memory of Trenches near the Soča River” Marko Štepec (2018) outlines not only the history of the battles taking place on this front, but also all the tragedy of life along the front, supplying the front, and so on. For example, the information that one soldier required the support of five people in the hinterland alone testifies to the magnitude of this war and the inclusion of the civilian population in the battles. During the first five battles, the frontline between the two armies remained practically the same, but then in August 1916 the Italian forces conquered Gorizia and the Austro-Hungarian forces also had to retreat from the Doberdò Plateau to the new defense line in the Karst region. However, during the twelfth offensive, or the Battle of Caporetto, the Austro-Hungarian forces reinforced by German units defeated the Italians and forced them to retreat all the way to the Piave River. Upon the collapse of Austria-Hungary in October 1918, the Italians, backed by the Allied powers, recovered the territory up to the Postojna Gate – that is, the border legalized by the 1920 Treaty of Rapallo concluded between Italy and Yugoslavia. The demographic structure of the area changed significantly because many Slovenian settlements lost men both young and old on the front. Under Italy (i.e., a winner of the First World War), the memories of Slovenian

residents (i.e., the losers) were the more painful; the experiences of their losses and the feelings accompanying them became intimate, a matter of an individual family or village, and the subject of mourning at village cemeteries.

As part of the project *Cultural Heritage of Interpretation and Reinterpretation*, special attention was directed to the landscape affected by war. The Upper Soča Valley contains many well-preserved remains from the Isonzo Front battlefields, which provide a special type of landscape experience. Many monuments, signs, and inscriptions across the land (Ingold 2000; cf. Tilley 1994) evoke wartime memories through contemporary “authentic” forms of landscape experience (Selwyn 1995). Visitors can stroll through the fields where the battles took place, enter a shaft, or climb to the bottom of a preserved trench to relive the claustrophobic experience of a soldier observing the enemy on the other side. They can stop by the memorials dedicated to known and unknown soldiers that fell on the front (e.g., the wrongly convicted and executed residents of Idrsko killed by the Italians during an unsuccessful offensive). All these routes, locations, and objects that emerged during the war have been the subject of various discourses, among which mention should be made of the activities at the level of local communities, the more official discourses of governing and national institutions, and diverse, primarily European, international programs and projects throughout various periods. On the one hand, all this contributed to evoking memories and providing traces and, on the other, it altered the interpretation of their history and collective memory. The ways of perceiving and shaping the wartime and peacetime memory landscape reflect the political process of reinterpretation and production of local, regional, national, and European history and memory.

Between the two world wars, the area of today’s Slovenian Littoral belonged to the Kingdom of Italy. However, it should be mentioned that the first monuments in this area were already created during the war. A unique example of the Secession, Church of the Holy Spirit at Javorca (near Tolmin),⁴ was designed and built in 1916 in honor of Austro-Hungarian casualties. In 1916 another religious object was created, the mosque in Log pod Mangartom, built by mostly Muslim Bosnian soldiers. After 1918, when the area was annexed by Italy, numerous monuments arose in memory of Italian sacrifices. The official, distinctly fascist, rhetoric legitimized the Italian colonial positions and symbolically materialized them through large memorials to Italian soldiers erected in Redipuglia, Oslavia/Oslavje, and Kobarid itself – the town that continues to be associated with the great Italian defeat of 1917. After 1945, the new state of Yugoslavia became responsible for the main care for monuments dedicated to the memorialization of events and heroes of the Second World War. Many Italian monuments, due to the experience of fascism, fell into ruin; however,

even the Slovenian monuments of the First World War were not maintained. Under the communist regime, the memories of the First World War and its victims were pushed into the background. This is also attested by the fact that the first campaigns for collecting weapons and other artefacts from the First World War were only created as part of private initiatives. In the mid-1980s, the idea of building a museum developed, leading to the establishment of the Kobarid Museum⁵ as the central unit dedicated to the memory of the First World War in the early 1990s. In the region of the Isonzo Front, the production of First World War heritage is especially active today and comprises many institutions and organizations, local, national, and private, as well as initiatives and collections gathered by various individuals.

Similar to the Western Front, the Isonzo Front has become a symbolic memory landscape, where visits to routes, monuments, and museums shape personal and local identities and the local or national memory of the First World War (Saunders 2001). Various stakeholders are taking care of cemeteries and restoring monuments that decayed under communist Yugoslavia. Many private and public museum collections were established; the restoration of military infrastructure and logistics has reconstructed the wartime memory landscape, and much has been done to research and prepare military casualty records for public use. Several international associations have been included, and many programs and initiatives are taking place. Tourism and the development of memorialization at the local level and state protocol at the national level are the two main functions.

One of the internationally most successful projects of this kind is the Walk of Peace trail, established in 2000, which is a research-based extension of previous heritage initiatives. Its main contribution is the reshaping of the mountain landscape, which, through the restoration of bunkers, trenches, and military routes, is acquiring the structure of an outdoor museum with an authentic historical landscape character. Routes of former military significance are today reinterpreted as memorial routes which also offer recreational and sightseeing information. At the same time, the landscaping project is acquiring an increasingly protocol function. In 2012, the Slovenian and Italian presidents, Danilo Türk and Giorgio Napolitano, became honorary patrons of the Walk of Peace trail, which runs from the Julian Alps to the Adriatic Sea and is also Slovenia's flagship contribution to the Pan-European formal remembrance of the centenary of the start of the Great War. The Walk of Peace trail includes the most beautiful Slovenian First World War memorial: the church at Javorca, which is a symbol of calling for reconciliation. Although First World War heritage bears many particular meanings, it can also act as a vessel for the active cooperation of new EU peripheries in contemporary European ideological landscapes. In the national sense, it thus represents a new Europeanization of Slovenian history.



Figure 1. *Simulation of the twelfth battle or the Battle of Caporetto at the Kobarid Museum in October 2017. Photograph by Jurij Fikfak.*

For the case of the Upper Soča Valley region and the broader Julian Alps, the researchers thus examined the ways that the landscape is being changed through the restoration and (re)inscription of First World War monuments, and the social perception and influences of the memory landscape of wartime and peacetime. Using the ethnographic and historical approaches, they explored the physical and symbolical landscape, its experiencing by different participants or visitors (the research community, tourists, and hikers), and the stories (or discourses) of the landscape as they are produced by experts, institutions, amateur collectors of First World War memorabilia, locals, and visitors. The focus was on monuments, locations, routes of remembrance (memorials, cemeteries, churches, mule tracks, etc.), practices, politics of remembrance (e.g., commemorations at the local or state level, and museums), and narratives and discourses as spheres of interpretation.

In the article “Memorialization of the First World War in the Landscape of the Julian Alps”, Jaka Repič (2018) addresses issues of memorialization processes and heritage construction, which are inscribed into the landscapes of the Isonzo Front in Slovenia. The most common conclusion made by historians is

that landscapes tend to be static or even empty, and contain imprints of many military actions. As such, they should be part of the practices of memorialization. On the other hand, Nicholas Saunders, a British anthropologist and archaeologist, stresses that landscapes cannot be separated from human experiences; they are all part of the complex world of relationships, memories, and histories.



Figure 2. *The hundredth anniversary of the church at Javorca, September 2016.
Photograph by Miha Kozorog.*



Figure 3. Austrian soldier. Mount Kolovrat: a 2017 reconstruction of the 1917 Battle of Caporetto. Photograph by Jurij Fikfak.

Repič explores relations and connections between the military and postwar landscapes. He discovers how experiences of the landscape and commemorations create a palimpsest of interpretations and heritage productions. Social actors and institutions brought together in the Walk of Peace trail campaign, and individuals have arranged paths, monuments, and memorial places as tourist and hiking destinations. They form narratives that are intensifying national and local political discourses and commemorations. The Isonzo Front

and its background are a chronotope of simultaneous changes in the process of appropriations of heritage.

In the *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, about fifteen articles are dedicated to the commemoration, including Danilo Šarenac's (2014) article "Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (South East Europe)". This brief encyclopedia article about rituals in Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece does not include Slovenian soldiers. This gap is closed by Tatiana Bajuk Senčar (2018) in her article "From the Hinterland: Commemorating the Centenary of World War I in Bohinj", using the case of the Bohinj Valley and its surroundings. The hundredth anniversary of the events that took place during the First World War definitely inspired many commemorations across Europe and also stimulated the establishment of a special committee and partly also the staging of certain events (more than four hundred). The author uses the concrete example of the Bohinj Valley in northwestern Slovenia to document and analyze diverse practices of commemoration and heritagization of the First World War. She explores the degree to which tourism is a generator of remembrance, and the extent to which heritage is globalized and serves as an important factor in shaping local identity at the same time (cf. Winter 2009). On the other hand, this has to do with how global trends affect contemporary commemorations and heritagization practices. A key question is also who the social actors are that think it is appropriate or necessary to define the Bohinj Valley and its surroundings as a First World War heritage landscape.

The reinterpretations of the First World War would not be complete without an emphasis on the actors that re-create heritage discourses and use, and sometimes even instrumentalize, the First World War. The first perspective is provided by Miha Kozorog (2018) in his article "Knowledge of Place in Three Popular Music Representations of the First World War", which explores the perception, reception, and production of images of the First World War. It is based on three recent representations in Slovenian popular music: songs by Rodoljubac, Bakalina, and Bratko Bibič. These musicians and musical groups are characterized by the fact that they are connected with the historical region of the Isonzo Front. The author analyzes how the internalization of the knowledge of place and time informed their compositions, identifying four ways of knowing a place, which can be described as absorbing locally shared narratives about a place, engagement with landscapes and the environment, personal memories, and reconsidering a place.

Local collectors form another type of actors, who are analyzed by Boštjan Kravanja (2018) in his article "Learning by Collecting: Amateur Collectors and Their Shifting Positions in the Isonzo Front Heritagization and Tourism Adaptation". Kravanja establishes that there are many local museums and

private local collections in the area: nearly twenty are open to the public and over a hundred individuals are serious collectors of heritage material. The problem is that these collectors are not registered anywhere, especially by public institutions. The issue gives rise to conflicts between the institutions and collectors: on the one hand, the institutions are ensuring that the material is accessible to the public and, on the other, the collectors are depleting the heritage landscape through their activities.

The Great War did not only claim over fifteen million lives, but has also radically changed the self-image and self-perception of Europeans. Ethnology and folklore studies have dealt with these changes as well as with wartime cultural heritage and especially the heritage of the First World War to a relatively small extent. With the studies conducted as part of the project *Cultural Heritage of the First World War* in this issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, the journal *Traditiones* (Jezernik & Fikfak 2018), and the 15th volume of *Ethnologia Europaea Centralis* (2018), this situation is at least partly changing.

NOTES

- ¹ Helmut Kohl described this event in the following video segment: Helmut Kohl: Hand in Hand, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Bj6-y0NfZU&feature=player_embedded, last accessed on 5 November 2018.
- ² “Italy entered World War I in 1915, declaring war on Austria-Hungary with the express aim of ‘redeeming’ or reconquering borderland territory claimed by Italy but occupied for decades or even centuries by the Habsburgs” (Gruber 1998).
- ³ This thematic issue is part of the production of works on cultural heritage and the First World War in the project J6-7173, which is funded by the Slovenian Research Agency and headed by Božidar Jezernik, and further supported by two research programs.
- ⁴ See <https://www.soca-valley.com/en/attractions/first-world-war/javorca/2018012412091021/javorca-memorial-church-of-the-holy-spirit/>, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heiligengeistkirche_Javorca, both last accessed on 5 November 2018.
- ⁵ More about the museum in Kobarid see at <https://www.kobariski-muzej.si>, last accessed on 5 November 2018.

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