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**Storia Militare Contemporanea**

a cura di  
VIRGLIO ILARI



*Società Italiana di Storia Militare*

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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma  
Contatti: [direzione@nam-sigm.org](mailto:direzione@nam-sigm.org) ; [virgilio.ilari@gmail.com](mailto:virgilio.ilari@gmail.com)

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Distintivo speciale del Dipartimento della Guerra concesso agli addetti al Progetto Manhattan per la Bomba A(Atomica) che hanno lavorato almeno sei mesi tra il 19 giugno 1942 e il 6 agosto 1945

Foto 1198 DOE Ed Westcott 1945 Oak Ridge Tennessee (Wikimedia Commons)

ROLF WÖRSDÖRFER,  
*Isonzo 1915/17*  
*Völkerschlachten am Gebirgsfluss*

Padeborn, BRILL/Schöningh, 2022, pp. 302, 28 photos, 4 maps, € 27.94



If it may be permitted to express a regret, at the end of a period dedicated to the remembrance of the centenary of the First World War, it must be the continued tendency of scholars to remain confined within their own national and linguistic boundaries. This despite the fact that, on the Austro-Italian front alone, no fewer than 14 different nationalities were represented, each having now constructed its own memory and perspective of that period. The challenges involved in seeking to master the resulting literature, built up from a kaleidoscope of memoirs and historical writings from such complexity and linguistic differentiation, is all too obvious. And it is perhaps the very obviousness of these chal-

lenges that has provided a convenient alibi for scholars of narratives, studies, and reconstructions to draw only on the data and literature falling within their own linguistic scope.

It is therefore with surprise and satisfaction that this new contribution by Rolf Wörsdörfer, lecturer at the Technischen Universität in Darmstadt and researcher at the Institute for Eastern and South-Eastern European Studies in Regensburg, can be welcomed. Like Mario Silvestri's now somewhat aged monograph,<sup>1</sup> this work too is dedicated to the Isonzo Front alone, covering the whole period from the outbreak of the conflict in the spring of 1915 through to the epilogue of local fighting in late 1917. An introduction sets the scene, following which Chapter I contrasts the two protagonists and their plans. Chapters II through IV explore the initial engagements in 1915 in Karst / Carso, the advent of attrition around Görz / Goritz during 1916, and the 'shoulder' battles and German breakthrough following their offensive at Karfreit / Caporetto in 1917. Chapter V considers the advance to the Piave in October 1918 and the problems of administration of the 'occupied' lands, while Chapter VI offers an interesting contribution on the local elaboration of the memory of the conflict, both on the Italian side and on the part of the nations that arose from the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Throughout the work, Wörsdörfer demonstrates an enviable mastery, not only of the key historiographical literature, but also of personal accounts drawn from many of the protagonists of the Isonzo battles. He therefore follows the path originally trodden by Mario Isnenghi<sup>2</sup> and then re-invented in the English-speaking world by Paul Fussell<sup>3</sup> and Eric Leed.<sup>4</sup> In a broad and articulate manner, Wörsdörfer draws upon a wide range of individual memoirs, published by participants from both sides of the conflict during the 1920s and 1930s, including not only those already well known in the literature, but also many that have received less prominence. The result is that these personal accounts become the pivot of a historical reconstruction that grafts the dry official data and military reports onto a living fabric, rich in its immediate and dramatic nature, woven from the experi-

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1 Mario SILVESTRI, *Isonzo 1917* (np, Einaudi, 1965).

2 Mario ISNENGI, *La prima Guerra mondiale* (Bologna, Zanichelli, 1972).

3 Paul FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, Oxford U.P., 1975).

4 Eric J. LEED, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge U. P., 1981).



305mm Mortar near Lucinico (Goritz)

ences of the protagonists and etched into their memories.

The consequence is that the golden thread of the war is exposed – perhaps even ‘finally’ – through the continuous cross-referencing from one national and linguistic experience to another. This generates a sense of repartee, in which all of the main narrators participate. In bringing together this mass of different voices and perspectives, Wörsdörfer deserves credit for always maintaining a fine sense of balance, both in the complex process of reconstructive synthesis and in his evaluative judgements. A central feature of that balance is the way in which the sources from the opposing camps are compared, against the backdrop of the common difficulties and tragedies imposed by the war on all sides.

Perfection, however, is a prerogative of the gods. So too here, there remain gaps, some significant. Wörsdörfer perhaps too readily follows the questionable views of previous historians in his misunderstanding of the battles after the fall of Gorizia (‘Cadorna’s shoulders’) (p. 141) and in his criticisms of General Luigi Capello at the Bainsizza Plateau (p. 159). He also fails to appreciate the burden

placed on the Italian Chief of Staff from his knowledge that France and England might recall their artillery, or even threaten to cut off supplies of raw materials essential to the country's life, should the Italians reduce their pressure on the Austro-Hungarians. In addition, Wörsdörfer's assessment of Cadorna that spent his career behind a desk (*Schreibtischkarriere*: p. 72) appears based purely on his not having participated in the Libyan campaign, thereby overlooking his successful periods of command and his high reputation with his peers.

Several minor inaccuracies may also be highlighted, while acknowledging these do not undermine the overall power of Wörsdörfer's account. The Czech Lieutenant Dr Ljudevit Pivko (p. 63), instigator of the Carzano defection which was bungled the Italian command, is referred to as 'festgenommen und kam in Haft' (arrested and detained), only released after an amnesty. In reality, following his defection to the Italians, Pivko created the so-called 'green department', which was to form the first nucleus of the 'legions' of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers who fought with the Entente forces. Elsewhere: the Italian First Army never had responsibility for the Carnia Zone (p. 171); in Plezzo, the 'Friuli' Brigade employed the 87<sup>th</sup> and 88<sup>th</sup> Regiments, and not the 8<sup>th</sup> as claimed (p. 176); and Tullio Marchetti was never head of the Information Office of the General Staff, but rather that of the First Army (p. 211).

There are also problems with the presentation of the text. Many statements and verbatim quotations either lack references entirely or these are not very precise, lumping together several authors, even of different nationalities. The references in the body of Chapter II do not correspond numerically with the notes at the end of the volume, which inexplicably continue the numbering from the previous chapter. The photos, although of high quality, suffer from digital printing, which, by eliminating greyscale, greatly reduces the depth of field and partially compromises their documentary value. In both cases, it might be expected the publisher would have identified these issues.

Despite these errors and deficiencies, however, it must be underlined that Wörsdörfer has produced a pioneering contribution of great interest. The insights revealed through this excellent work deserve to be followed up and expanded.

PAOLO POZZATO and MARTIN SAMUEL





Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj in uniforme di capitano d'artiglieria

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