

The destiny of Italian prisoners in Austro-Hungarian POW camps during the First World War: remembering the defeat of Caporetto 100 years on

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SUMMARY

The living conditions of Italian prisoners during the First World War were extremely difficult. At the end of the conflict, the treatment of Italian soldiers in Austro-Hungarian POW camps and in those of the German territories was recognized as particularly harsh in comparison with that of other prisoners. The reasons may be ascribed to three main factors. The Italian prisoners paid the price of being considered traitors, since Italy was allied with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and with Germany until 1914, subsequently switching to the side of France, the United Kingdom and Russia. The Italian government and the Italian High Command considered their soldiers poorly inclined to engage in a war which became over time increasingly costly in terms of human sacrifice. The strategy pursued by the General-in-Chief Luigi Cadorna was very aggressive and showed little care for the life conditions of his troops, who were frequently thrown into the fray and exposed to potential slaughter. Due to this negative judgement on their troops' willingness to fight, the government did not help, and even hindered, the despatch of packages of food and clothes to prisoners in the Austro-Hungarian and German camps via the

Red Cross. The idea of a better life in the trenches compared with that expected in the camps as prisoners was widespread. Thirdly, the maritime blockade of the Adriatic Sea over time reduced to starvation the populations of Austria, Hungary and Germany, which obviously had grave repercussions on prisoners. It was estimated that around 100,000 Italians lost their lives in POW camps; after the defeat at Caporetto, when over 250,000 prisoners were captured, the number of deaths rose. The main causes of death were: tuberculosis, pneumonia, malnutrition and typhoid fever. At the end of the war, when coming back to Italy, former POWs were interned for months in camps (located predominantly in the Emilia region) and had to face interrogation and trials to demonstrate they were not deserters and were free to go back home. In the meantime, many lost their lives due to "Spanish" flu, pneumonia and other infectious diseases. Only the mobilization both of families and public opinion forced the Italian government to close the camps at the end of the year 1919.

Keywords: World War, Caporetto defeat, Italian prisoners.

«...siamo tutti viti in una macchina che si scaglia avanti e nessuno sa dove, che si ributta indietro e che nessuno sa perché [...]».

“all of us are like screws of a machine which goes on and nobody knows where it is directed, and it may come back, and nobody knows why...”
Ernst Toller. *Die Wandlung* (1919).

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Over 600,000 Italian soldiers were taken as prisoners during the First World War and detained in numerous concentration camps in Austria-Hungary, Germany and Poland; among these slight less 300,000 of them were deported after the defeat of Caporetto in October 1917. It is estimated that during imprisonment around 100,000 of them died¹, because of malnutrition, tuberculosis, typhoid fever and the *Spanish influenza* [1, 2]. At the end of the war, many soldiers faced a further internment period in Italy before going back home. The greatest number of them was kept in the Emilia region of Italy, since they were thought to have surrendered to the enemy without fighting.

This internment started at the end of the war and was prolonged for several months until the year 1919, so that the last veterans came back to their families only in January 1920. At the end of the war, the *Spanish influenza*, together with its lower respiratory tract complications, caused a very elevated number of deaths among these veterans who were incorrectly retained. The life conditions in these concentration camps were very hard.

Only the mobilization of prisoners' families and the intervention of the public opinion halted the prolongation of this further imprisonment.

Because of a broad spectrum of causes, among all the fighting nations, Italy had got the greatest number of prisoners in comparison with overall conscripts and the deaths under detention resulted proportionally more numerous. At the end of the war, many controversies were due to the behavior of the Italian government, which made unfavorable the sending of packages containing food and clothes to Italian soldiers imprisoned in the concentration camps in Austria-Hungary and Germany, since all shipping procedure had to be ensured by the international Red Cross. Through such a boycott, the authorities wanted to introduce the belief, in the Italian conscripts who were imprisoned, that the life in the Austrian and German camps was more hard compared with their trench life: in this way, the temptation of surrender without fighting would have been reduced. Finally, the deaths due to malnutrition occurring

in the concentrations camps probably represented the major cause of death among Italian soldiers. The malnutrition opened a broad pathway towards infectious diseases, in particular pneumonia, tuberculosis, and extremely severe psychiatric syndromes: in fact, a very elevated number of prisoners suffered from a depressive status, and from the post-traumatic distress disturbance.

Aim of our study is to contribute to the understanding of the causes which contributed to a so elevated rate of deaths among Italian soldiers, who became prisoners in the camps of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and of the German ones. A short historical balance seems useful. In the year 1882, The Italian Kingdom had adhered to the political and military alliance called "Triple Alliance", together with the German and the Austrian-Hungarian empire. It was an alliance with clear defence purposes, which guaranteed a military intervention in defence of one among the three countries engaged in the alliance, whether an external attack had been of concern.

The "Triple Alliance" had been founded with the clear purpose to counteract another alliance system, defined as "Triple Agreement" (*Triplice Intesa*), which included the English empire, France, and the Russian empire. We herewith underline that after the first stipulation, during the subsequent decades, the "Triple Alliance", among Italy, Germany, and the Austrian-Hungarian empire, was repeatedly reaffirmed (years 1882, 1887, 1891, 1896, 1902, and 1908). However, some clauses limited the involvement of nations, which stipulated the treaty, in the event of a war. The article 4 exempted from military intervention, whether one among the allied country had declared war to a fourth one. Another aspect clearly posed Italy in an ambiguous situation. Although our country was part of an alliance with Austria, it continued to aspire to the liberation of the lands with a majority Italian population, including Trentino, Friuli, and Istria regions, which were still under the Austrian rule. In addition, Italy had an interest in the Balkans, since it had the aim to gain the control of Dalmatia².

The assassination in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 of the heir to the throne of the Austrian-Hungari-

¹ According to more recent estimates, the deaths were 50,000, as suggested by Professor Barbero, during a conference in Bologna, on November 2, 2017, entitled: Defeat. The failures of Caporetto.

² This element caused a conflictive situation between Italy and the Allies, during the negotiation for the peace in Paris., at the end of the Great War.

an Empire, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was followed by the outbreak of the World War I in the August of the same year. Italy did not follow Austria in its war against Serbia, but decided to remain neutral, on the basis of the article 4 of the Alliance treaty. There was another circumstance which formally put the Italian Kingdom in the condition of leaving the "Triple Alliance".

The article 7 of the treaty, about an eventual help from Italy to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, established that whether a war in the Balkans had been declared by Austria, Italy could refrain from the entering war, since a preliminary agreement specific for this geographical-political area was lacking. During previous years, the Italian Kingdom had shown some strategical interests for the still raising Albanian nation and had some interests in Dalmatia, in order to put the entire Adriatic Sea under a complete strategical Italian control. Based on these strategical purposes, after the start of the World War, some negotiations were carried out with the the nations of the "Triple Agreement" (Triplice Intesa). These talks finally led, through secret meetings occurred in London in April 1915, to a military alliance with France and the United Kingdom. These agreements established the acquisition by Italy of the "unredeemed" regions, if it had entered the war and won together with the "Triple Agreement". After these agreements, Italy underlined its "limited" adherence to the "Triple Alliance" pacts, ended its neutrality and finally participated in the war against its formerly allied nations.

Therefore, the Italian Kingdom on May 24, 1915, attacked the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, with the declared aim to make free the so called unredeemed Italian regions. In the Austrian-Hungarian Empire this pathway of separation from the "Triple Alliance", although justified by the Italian party as arising from diplomatic agreements, was considered as a treason and, consequently, a strongly negative attitude emerged against Italians and, in particular, Italian soldiers. Anyway, it has to be considered that on May 24, 1915, Italy attacked the Austrian Empire borders, invading the territories of the Trentino and Friuli regions, where the Italian inhabitants were more numerous compared with people with a different origin. This hostile feeling was confirmed in the subsequent year (1916), between May 15 and June 27, when the Austrian-Hungarian army launched an attack called "*Strafexpedition*", i.e. "*punishment*

expedition", which was directed to punish those who had been formerly allied as traitors. From a military point of view, this conflict brought the Austrian army very close to obtain a deep penetration into the Veneto lowlands. The Italians, although in trouble, succeeded in limiting the attack; among the two different armies the deaths were exceedingly elevated, summing up to 730,545 men [2, 3].

After this battle, which was called "Battle of the Highlands", during the second half of 1916 and during the year 1917 (until the month of August), the conflict was particularly intensified in the regions of the Eastern borders of Italy, where the famous "Isonzo river battles" took place. The military strategy of the Italian army did not change: according to the General Cadorna's doctrine, it was based on an unscrupulous use of the concussive force of the troops.

At the end of the "*Strafexpedition*", when the Italian army was preparing a counteroffensive, the two Italian irredentist patriots Cesare Battisti (1875-1916) and Fabio Finzi (1894-1916), were captured. At the end of a quick process due to a charge of high betrayal, they were hanged. The Figure 1 depicts the time when Cesare Battisti received his death sentence on July 12, 1916, only two days after his arrest.

The vision of the General Cadorna is summarized in his "red booklet" - a universal message contained into a red cover - based on his principle to assault the enemy positions with soldiers masses, careless of the enemy fire [1, 2]. In the "blinded" respect for this doctrine, the Italian army bled to death by assuming a frontal attack strategy, which was burdened by an extremely elevated number of human victims.

As stated, the "doctrine" of the General in chief was characterized by an unscrupulous use of the troops, used as a true "cannon fodder"³. The

³ During the attacks, the Italian soldiers were launched against the enemy lines, where the soldiers waited on their defence and could rely upon the new and easily movable machine guns (with weight of only 14 Kg). The first 11 battles on the Isonzo river were characterized by a strategy of repeated assaults by Italians, with Austrian-Hungarian troops remaining on defence. The offence strategy against the modern weapons had already shown its significant limits, during the 10 months of war on the French and German front. It could not be proposed in the Carso region, due



Figure 1 - The execution of Cesare Battisti (July 12, 1916), at The Buonconsiglio Castle, Trento, Italy. (Museo Civico del Risorgimento, Bologna).

General in Chief showed an absolute inability in understanding the most evident material needs of the soldiers and also his relationship with his closer military collaborators was limited and obtuse. His controversies with the General Luigi Capello, chief of the second Italian army and herald of a more tactical vision of the conflict, were well known. It appears evident that, lacking a serious communication, the conflict of different visions and personalities was expected to seriously damage the Italian chances.

The conditions suffered by the Italian soldiers in their trenches, as largely understood later, were particularly hard and health care risks became evident already during the first weeks of the war⁴ [1,

to the type of soil, which clearly favored a defensive approach, compared with an offensive one.

⁴ There was a documented deficiency of beds and linen in the advanced health care lines. This issue became evident in the months of July and August 1915, because of the onset of a cholera epidemic with 15,000-20,000 cases and the outbreak of typhoid fever with 6,000 cases; on the whole, 4,300 individuals died [4-6].

4]. The high command showed a great mistrust against its troops, regarding the soldiers' willingness to fight, even before the defeat of Caporetto and Cadorna was the most vivid supporter of this vision; after the defeat of Caporetto, the accusations of cowardice were so virulent that they negatively conditioned the image of the so many prisoners of the Austrian-German lagers, coming back home at the end of the war. The Cadorna's strategic vision on the use of soldiers as a critical mass for the impact was extremely simple, in fact he told: *"We need to instill the discipline in these rough and illiterate young people! ... The first line has to serve as a shield to the second one."*

It has to be underlined that, when the attack was launched, behind the Italian soldiers there were police officers (the Italian "Carabinieri"), who were ordered to shoot those who waited or were hesitating. The vision of the discipline by General Cadorna looks clear from this order: *"Every soldier should be certain to consider his superior as a brother or as a father, when needed, but he has to be also certain that the superior has got the sacred power to immediately put to death the recalcitrant and coward individuals ..."* [1, 2].

A tragic consequence of these orders was the aberrant practice of the decimations, in the event of insubordination of troops refusing to perform assaults which were perceived as burdened by an extremely high human cost⁵. Such a practice was carried out also for mild cases of poor soldiers, in some episodes. Due to the lack of documentary proofs (no regular processes were performed), it is not possible to establish the number of deaths based on decimation. Since the early skids of the army in the year 1916 on the Asiago highlands, Cadorna authorized the resort to the decimation, which, in some cases, was applied even in no severe situations⁶.

As we anticipated, since the first two years of war, the Italian government made more difficult the

⁵ Italy was the only country which adopted this approach. This decision was assumed to re-establish the desired level of discipline. This practice was possible on the ground of the Military Penal Code of the army, dated to 1869.

⁶ Giovanna Procacci reports that on May 26, 1916, over the slopes of Mount Mosciagh, an infantry regiment was dispersed after a panic attack; some soldiers became lost in the wood and came back only the next day. Among these soldiers 12 were drawn by lot and later were shot [1].

sending of family packages to prisoners. This approach stemmed from the willingness to diffuse among troops the following idea: the soldiers surrendering to the enemy and becoming prisoners made a more dangerous choice in comparison with the remaining in the trenches and with the continuing the fight [1, 2]. In the year 1916 the Italian government was aware of the real conditions of the prisoners as well as of the populations themselves in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. This difficult situation was caused by the strategy of the maritime blockade made effective in the Adriatic Sea by the Italian navy and by the Allied navies. They made the supplies and provisions impossible and generated a severe nutritional crisis in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

Because of this lack of food supplies, it was evident that prisoners could not be sufficiently nourished. On these grounds, the impossibility to respect the Aja international agreements of 1907 became evident, since the clear indications on the war prisoners, including those of a human detention, could not be respected⁷ [1, 2]. Just to

⁷ The main articles of the Aja convention for the improvement of the prisoners' destiny, during land and maritime war (October 18, 1907), are reported. The aim was to ensure a human and dignified treatment to war prisoners, not only in relation to nutrition, housing, and health care assistance, but also to religious assistance and correspondence with families.

Art. 4) "War prisoners are under the power of the enemy Government, but not in the hands of troops and corps which caught them. They have to be treated with humanity. All their personal belongings, save weapons, horses and military maps, remains with them".

Art. 5) "War prisoners may be confined in cities, fortresses, camps, or any other place and they cannot move away beyond the established limits; but they cannot be imprisoned, save the needed safety measures and only until the duration of circumstances, which made this measure necessary".

Art. 6) The prisoners may be forced to work, save the officers on duty, who however cannot have any relationship with war operations". When employed with public administrations, they should be paid, as the military Officers who carry out the same work". In the event of private citizens, "the work conditions are ruled by the agreements between private organizations and military authorities". From the received wage, the expenses for their condition of prisoners should be retained, but the surplus should be given back to the former prisoner, at the time of liberation".

guarantee human conditions to Italian prisoners, the Government should have sent adequate food supplies through the International Red Cross organization. On the other hand, the choice to refuse a statal help has been made, with the consent of the highest military authorities. Only aids by private citizens, who were obviously suffering from famine and from conditions of extreme poverty as the majority of Italian families with soldiers on the front, were accepted.

Now we have to consider the events, occurring before the defeat of Caporetto. During the eleventh battle of the Isonzo river, occurred between August 17 and August 31, the Italians obtained a limited success, taking possession of the city of Gorizia, paying an exceeding tribute in terms of human lifes. We remind that during the Summer 1917, the Austrian-Hungarian army faced a true crisis, and therefore the German allies became convinced of the need to concentrate selected troops on the Italian front, to sustain the allied Austrian Empire which showed some difficulty. They were convinced that vacating the Southern front, it will be easier to win on the Western front, before the United States will join the war together with English and French armies. On October 24 at 2:00 am - thanks to a serious preparation through the supplying of military corps, with a significant movement of troops from the Eastern front⁸, a great military offensive was carried out [3]. We underline that in this occasion the attacking German army also used gas weapons, previously used in the Western front of the war, in order to bring down the Italian soldiers.

The main author of this attack, which led to the breakthrough of Italian lines, was the twelfth Silesian division headed by the General Arnold

Art. 7) "The maintenance of prisoners (food, housing and clothes), is on charge of the Government of the State who keep them prisoners and where they are; the treatment is the same of the regular troops".

Art. 16) Mail exemption. "The letters, the packages, and the money sent by mail to the prisoners or sent by them, are not subject to any mail tax, in countries of departure, transit, and destination".

Art. 18) "War prisoner have large liberty of worship, when concerning their religion".

⁸ The transfer of the German army occurred by train, but the arrival to the war front occurred through forced marches performed overnight, in the attempt to surprise the Italian army.

Lequis, consisting of selected troops. These soldiers had been secretly moved from the Eastern front. During the first morning hours of October 24, the German soldiers advanced in depth, with the complicity of the fog and a great tactical intelligence (unlike Italian troops). They followed the Isonzo river valley, reaching in a few hours the small town of Caporetto, after a surprising march of over 20 Km. In the same time, the lieutenant Erwin Rommel (the future general nicknamed as "the desert fox" during the World War II), led a selected unit of the Württemberg mountain battalion. He achieved a series of brilliant successes, employing skillful infiltration tactics in the mountain scenario and taking prisoners many Italian soldiers who were surrounded and surprised behind⁹ [4].

This attack - which inaugurated a different military strategy - deeply divided the Italian front line, causing panic among the Italian troops, both the frontline and also the rear lines, which were found clearly unprepared to close the passage. From this point of view, at the end of the war, a commission of inquiry underlined clear responsibilities of General Capello, the chief of the second Italian army. He did not organize his divisions to create a defence against the imminent enemy attack. The same responsibilities were attributed to the General Pietro Badoglio, who headed the twenty seventh army corp close to the town of Tolmino. Finally, also the supreme command was criticized, since it wasted several days, hesitating before ordering the retreat and therefore leaving the soldiers uncertain about their duties [5-7]. The tactics operated by the German army included a deep attack with selected troops, which overcame the Italian lines and led to a complete destruction of the "position war" paradigm, which had conditioned the behavior of all armies until that time. The battle of Caporetto was followed by the extensive retreat of the Italian forces until the Piave river line, together with the lost of extended territories in the Friuli and Veneto regions. In addition, the second Italian army headed by General Capello remained surrounded in a sort of sack and excluded from the military operations. At the end of the attack, on November 7, the de-

⁹ At the end of the war campaign, the corps headed by Rommel took 9.000 prisoners and an impressive booty of weapons.



Figure 2 - Italian prisoners march on the streets in the city of Gorizia, after its reconquest by the Austro-Hungarian troops, following the defeat of Caporetto. (Museo Civico del Risorgimento, Bologna).

feat costed to Italy 11,000 dead and around 29,000 wounded soldiers, and around 280,000 prisoners (Figure 2).

Furthermore, 350,000 drifter soldiers joined in this escaping to avoid becoming prisoners, during the retreat toward the Veneto region [8-11]. At the end of the retreat, the front line had been moved back about 150 Km in the Western direction, to stop the advance of Austro-German troops, the bridges of the Tagliamento river had been blown up¹⁰. In addition, all food, clothes and household goods were burned, to avoid leaving advantages to the enemies, through the requisition of strategic goods which were remained behind the Italian lines, broken through on October 24.

The problem of drift soldiers afflicted our country during several months. These hungry men were wandering in all villages and towns of the Veneto and Emilia regions, leading discomfort to the local population [2, 12]. It has to be considered that a substantial part of these soldiers could be considered true deserters, although in a context where some motivated justifications were present. The military command, which many times had previously underlined the issue that Italian soldiers showed a poor inclination to fight (a responsibility was given to some subversive ideol-

¹⁰ Sometimes the bridges were blown up while masses of refugees and drifter soldiers were still passing, under the hard pressure of the Austro-German vanguards which were advancing rapidly.

ogies and to some pre-war positions of those who sustained the idea to avoid the war), after the defeat of Caporetto accused the soldiers of cowardice, when facing the enemies. This point of view was mainly taken by the main General of the Italian Army Luigi Cadorna, who wrote in the bulletin on 28 October 1917, referring to our troops: "They retired in a cowardly way without fighting or ignominiously surrendered to the enemy" [2]. The Italian government tried to stop the publication of this defamatory declaration of the Italian army's Commander in Chief, but it failed, since it had been already disclosed abroad and the allied were disconcerted when they understood this opinion, which appeared unfair, and it threw discredit upon the entire country. Taking this position, the supreme Italian command, downloaded to the troops the responsibility of the defeat, also covering the negligences and the inadequacy of the selected strategies and pursued the objective to hit the government which, according to its opinion, did not face with the needed energy the diffuse defeatism, responsible for ruining the pugnacious spirit of the army [10]. At the end of the conflict, it was demonstrated that the real percentage of soldiers, who defected before the enemy, was minimal, the great majority preferred to hide in the country and the number of presumed deserters also included persons who did not answer the call-up to arms, since they had emigrated to other countries, during the years preceding the war¹¹. After the war, the processes instructed because of desertion within Italy (military personnel who abandoned the zone behind the front or did not come back from a temporary permission), were 150,429 out of a total of 162,526, while the processes instructed because of passage to the enemies were 2,662; the cases involving soldiers accused of surrender in the presence of enemies were 9,472 [1, 13].

Looking to the crime of desertion, 391 executions were performed, out of 750 comprehensive death sentences. A desertion with passage to the enemy occurred only in 14 episodes [13]. From the

historical analysis of the Caporetto facts, the defeat was attributed to an underestimation of the intelligence informations by the Italian military headquarters. Actually, reports confirmed an imminent attack and evident statements pointed out the presence of novel German troops, strategically concentrated during the previous week, in the zones behind the front. The historians engaged in this research retrieved documents which show tactical errors by Italian commands, which were responsible of having left the operation troops on tactically vulnerable positions, after the success gained in the month of August; this criticism was mainly addressed to General Capello. During the early Austrian-German attack, gaps were found in the links among the high levels of the Italian armies; finally, a relevant criticism emerged in relation to the lack of a defensive reaction of the Italian artillery, when the attack of enemies became evident on October 24 [8-11, 14].

When the huge number of drift soldiers is considered, on November 2, whereas the Austrian-German attack was still ongoing, the Italian supreme command promulgated a public notice which stated an act of amnesty against deserters, provided that they had returned to their units before a certain date. On December 10, 1917, a decree which granted "*the immunity to deserters who had spontaneously returned to their military units*" was promulgated; this decree included severe punishments to military personnel who had not returned to their units as well as to those who had favoured the deserters. After this decree, around 27,000 soldiers came back to their former divisions [2]. This approach, in terms of holding the positions and re-organization, proved effective; in the town of Castelfranco Emilia, over 200,000 drift soldiers were concentrated in mid-December 1917; 50 days after the Caporetto defeat, 135,000 soldiers had been re-organized into operative troops [1,2]. However, inside the Italian Army a severe discontent remained, since the drift soldiers included in the second and fifth army, were devoted to do "*earth works*", while soldiers who did not declare to be drift were again engaged in fighting [15]. But the terrorist atmosphere remained: some months later, on April 21, 1918, a decree established that the desertion inside the country was equivalent to that occurring in front of the enemy and this condition was punishable by the death penalty. In order to control the mass of drift soldiers, recep-

¹¹ According to data of the statistical of the Ministry War's office, published in the year 1921, in Italy 870,000 reports and related processes were registered at War and military courts. Even 470,000 of them were due to the renitence to military lever evasion (370,000 living abroad, and 100,000 living in Italy [13].

tion centres were opened around Piacenza and in the towns of Castelfranco Emilia and Mirandola. Later, at the end of the war, in November 1918, the mass of prisoners released from Austrians after the Italian victory, obtained in Vittorio Veneto, was kept in the same centres [1, 2]. In addition, beyond the problem of drift soldiers, there was the emergency of refugees, who were particularly concentrated in the Emilia region. The status of refugees involved over 630,000 civilians (Figure 3); they were represented by citizens from

the provinces of Udine, Belluno, Treviso, Venezia and Vicenza, but also civilians from Gorizia, Trieste and Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia [16]. Now, we come back to the conditions of Italian soldiers kept as prisoners since October 24, 1917. A true situation of denutrition already occurred, during their transfert to the concentration camps (Figure 4).

The officers received reduced portions, but soldiers did not have food for several days and during the first week as prisoners they remained in



Figure 3 - Retreat of Italian soldiers after the defeat of Caporetto, and refugees transferring beyond the Piave river line. (Museo Civico del Risorgimento, Bologna).



Figure 4 - Mess time, in an Italian prison camp. (Museo Civico del Risorgimento, Bologna).

the open also overnight or were hosted in large camps in dramatic hygienic conditions (Figure 5). The medical lieutenant Basili in its relation written to inform around the conditions of prisoners affected by tuberculosis reported: *“Ranks of prisoners marched for 3, 4, 6 days, without distribution of any food and it was also prohibited to go to the fields with the aim to look for herbs and roots”* [17]. Numerous proofs and memories confirmed these facts, describing the awful conditions of imprisonment, reserved to Italians already in the early phases of transfert to Austrian concentration camps. The cruel and humiliating attitude against Italian soldiers proved particularly impressive.

The months following the defeat of Caporetto were the most tremendous of the entire conflict, and the mortality rate reached horrifying figures, especially among the soldiers. In the Mauthausen camp (Northern Austria), the greatest prison camp for Italians and the first to be built up, the resident individuals were 10-12,000. Over 900 subjects died in the two months after the defeat of Caporetto; the number of deaths ranged from a minimum of 10 to 30-50 per day; in this camp 2,100 prisoners became disable [18].

Based on the opinion of Italian physicians, two thirds of the soldiers suffered from tuberculosis. It was possible to see ill prisoners, looking for stockfish bones and pieces of bread in the rubbish, trying to wash them and immediately eating them [19]. Tacconi reports that beyond trying to catch

and eat mice, dogs and cats, also animal carrions were exumed, with the aim to find a bone [20]. It has to be underlined that the Mauthausen camp was subject to a sort of control.

In the camp of Milowitz (Moravia), the resident subjects were around 14,000. From registries, it was found that in the year 1916 over 46,000 prisoners had passed through the camp. After the defeat of Caporetto in this camp the situation became dramatic: a document reports that on November 27, 1917, the Italian prisoners were 6,073, and three months later the presence of Italian prisoners increased to 15,363. Around 10,000 of them died in 4-5 months. Tacconi reports that in Milowitz, 33% of prisoners went to death [20]. The death rate in this camp was so high, that a question was presented at the Austrian parliament. It was impossible to bury dead prisoners in a dignified way, so that a great number was buried into mass graves.

The camp of Sigmundsherberger (Southern Austria) became a prison camp for Italian prisoners only, in the year 1916. At the end of the war, a mortality rate of 9.9% was identified. After the defeat of Caporetto, the deaths were 122 in November, 238 in December, 359 in January, 386 in February, 355 in March, and 210 in April. The most frequent cause of death was pneumonia, followed by tuberculosis; among “various diseases” the death due to hunger was included [18].

A study performed about the causes of death

Figure 5 - Camp of Italian prisoners (Museo Civico del Risorgimento, Bologna).



in Austria concerning 500 causes of death was performed by consulting the Austrian registry of mortality. This research showed that 6,8% of lethal conditions were represented by complications of wounds, 32,8% by infectious or common diseases, 3,4% by accidents, but even 57% occurred because of tuberculosis and cachexia caused by hunger [17].

According to data collected by medical officers, even 35% of Italian soldiers died in the camps and about 40% of disabled ones, who re-entered Italy, were victims of tuberculosis. About 20% of deaths were due to hunger [21]. The soldiers coming from Southern Italy, less resistant to a cold climate, were the most wiped out by tuberculosis, according to the reports by Accame [1].

In the camp of Somorja, where around 8,000 soldiers were imprisoned, 20-30, and up to 50 of them went to death every day, according to the records of some physicians [17]. The news about the situation in Germany, considering the lower number of prisoners, were limited, but not re-assuring. In the camp of Lechfeld, from October 1917 to February 1918, 800 soldiers out of 4,000 died. In Wittemberg, where 2,500 prisoners were present, every day 5 or 6 soldiers went to death, leading the total to 300 cases in three months. In Hammelburg (Bavaria), over 200 prisoners out of 2,500 died, during the Winter 1917-1918 [17].

Now, we come to explain in detail the working duties of Italian prisoners. The officers were exempted from any activity, while soldiers and non-commissioned officers were forced to work. The majority of them was employed outside of the lagers, either in close sites, or in companies located far away from the camps. The displacements of prisoners occurred frequently, based on work needs but also on their physical attitudes. The majority of prisoners had to go out of the camp every morning, walking for several kilometers on foot, working 12-14 hours per day, and coming back in their huts late at night [1, 2]. According to the Article 6 of the Aja treaty, soldiers' work should have had no relationship with war operations.

In the Winter between 1917 and 1918, after the defeat of Caporetto, since the number of prisoners was exceedingly increased in the concentration camps, many of them were not forced to work, but this situation did not improve the mortality rates, since the overcrowding favoured the diffusion of infectious diseases; moreover, the very

high number of prisoners led to a reduction of food amounts distributed every day. Because of the lack of the Italian government's interest in the conditions of Italian prisoners during the year 1918, the families of prisoners started a strong protest. The criticism from allied governments and mainly from the Vatican¹² was added: everybody lamented the abandonment of Italian soldiers to their difficult destiny.

Criticism came also from the Italian delegate at the International Red Cross of Geneva, the Count Guido Vinci. The different treatment of French and English prisoners was evident: these two countries sent on weekly basis to every military prisoner 2 kg of bread, and France also gave assistance to Serbian prisoners retained in Austrian camps. The United States, even before their entering the war and having prisoners among their soldiers, arranged their own warehouses to supply US soldiers in case of their capture. The Count Guidi in his letter to the Chief of the Italian government Vittorio Emanuele Orlando wrote: *"In the camps of Italian prisoners the spirit of detained soldiers is depressed or excited until the revolt: not against Austria or Germany, but against a homeland, which is far and forgetful of its sons."* [1]

This embarrassing situation forced the Italian government to ask the Honourable Leonida Bissolati the responsibility to look for a negotiation with the aim to manage the problem of the Italian prisoners in Austria.

On September 21, 1918, in Berna a convention, which also enclosed an exchange of patients suffering from tuberculosis, was signed. After this accordance, prisoners with tuberculosis came back in Italy. Their mean body weight was 42 kg [1].

Also patients with severe psychiatric diseases had the possibility to be sent back to Italy. At the end of the war, thanks to these exchange conventions, 1,162 officers, 14,973 soldiers, and 18 civilians, either sick or wounded, succeeded in re-entering Italy. After the events of Caporetto, around 150,000 prisoners were present in Germany, but exchanges of sick prisoners were not accepted by Germany, due to the lower number of German prisoners (around 250 soldiers). During the month of September, without a previous agreement, Germany decided to send back thousands of sick prisoners

¹² Since January 1915 the Vatican was engaged in making negotiations easier [22].

to our country. Only in early November an agreement between Italy and Germany was subscribed, but, at the same time, the war had finished.

After the defeat of Caporetto, during the winter, the conditions of imprisoned soldiers and officers changed progressively, since the standard living conditions of officers did not show variation, in contrast, soldiers' conditions became worst and they were even more mistreated.

Giovanna Procacci reports that: "... the daily portion of food for prisoners in Austrian camps -slightly modified in the different periods of the war, but cut to a minimum during the Winter 1917-1918-, was represented by a barley coffee in the morning, a soup of water with some leaf of turnip or cabbage at lunch and dinner, one potato and a slice of black bread every day, with the adjunct of an herring, and a small piece of meat, two-three times a week, but both fish and meat were often rotten and impossible to be eaten [1, 17]. With this diet, it was impossible to reach 1,000 calories per day, compared with the 3,300 calories which had to be guaranteed to prisoners, according to international allied commission [1].

The news related to the treatment of soldiers put families to exert further pressure, also the public opinion joined the protest, and finally the situation of abandonment of the government changed in the summer of 1918. Italy was forced to send to Mauthausen and Sigmundsherberg a shipping of around 500 quintals of bread and crackers. However, it has to be considered that the other camps, like that of Milowitz, where the Italians continued to die in a disproportionate way until the end of the war, were not taken into account.

Beyond the hunger, also the low temperatures contributed to cause a great number of deaths. In the winter 1917-1918 in Germany and Austria the lowest external temperatures were close to -30° , the huts had no heating due to the absence of fuel and the overnight internal temperature ranged between -12 and -10°C . The number of blankets was limited and frequently one single blanket had to be shared by different prisoners. Since they had no heavy clothes, the soldiers could not have an adequate protection against cold. After the transfer march which followed their arrest in Caporetto, the soldiers had lacerated and dirty clothes, which were removed and substituted with a light cloth suit and with a canvas coat. These clothes were not able to protect them from the intense

cold. The number of available shoes was limited; therefore, they were replaced with clogs [1].

During the year 1918, France and the United Kingdom concluded an agreement with Austria and Germany to achieve an exchange of prisoners who already remained in the camps for a significant time, had a given state of service, and had sons; our country had not joined these agreements. With regard to Italians, the escape or a severe ongoing disease were the only possible conditions to obtain the re-entry in Italy. Based on these perspectives, simulation started to become common among soldiers and madness had the best success rate. Another used stratagem was to simulate complications after a wound. The analysis of the rate of repatriated soldiers shows that the officers were favoured by the Austro-Hungarian doctors¹³ [1].

In order to have more probability of success, many Italians voluntarily injured themselves to become disabled. Heart arrhythmias could follow the assumption of nicotine and caffeine infusions; pulmonary disorders could be provoked by smoking a mixture of sugar and sulphur, or inspiring the smoke produced by quicklime put in contact with water. Even an infectious disease such as tuberculosis did not guarantee repatriation to the affected soldiers; the conditions should be so advanced to make the work impossible; the priority of the enemies was to exploit the prisoners as working forces, and uniavoidably their inability to work favoured the repatriation.

According to records given to the investigating Commission, the following methods were used by soldiers to get injuries: the overthrow of boiling water on the feet as well as the ligation of the calves in the lower limbs, with the aim to induce ischemic lesions; other prisoners scratched the skin of their lower limbs with abrasive materials, this action was followed by the application on the wounds of salt and garlic. In the jargon of prison camps, the self-inducement of a disablement was called "to make the cure" [1]. The alternative to repatriation was to try the escape. The officers had the advantage to go out the camp, but their forced idleness led them to a psychological con-

¹³ At the end of the war, thanks to the agreements regarding exchanges, 1,162 officers, 14,793 soldiers, and 18 civilians succeeded in coming back to Italy, among wounded and sick persons.

dition which reduced their willingness to risk. Being away from camps and borders was associated with lack of food, clothes, and no knowledge of foreign languages, all factors which complicated their eventual project of escape [23-26].

The situation for soldiers and non-commissioned officers proved more complicated. While the officers would have been punished with mild sanctions, once they had been captured again, soldiers and non-commissioned officers were expected to be subjected to a beating by the guardians. The penalty included the "stake sentence", the imprisonment and also the execution, in some cases [27]. Regarding the possible execution by firing squads, the Commission responsible for prisoners, who were repatriated by the enemy, reported that five deserters were executed in Alessio, Albania.

At Sigmunsherberger in the year 1918 an episode of protest by officers occurred after the arrest of an officer who tried to escape and was mistreated. In order to repress the protest, the guards shot those who protested, killing an officer and injuring five more of them [1]. The prisoners presented a psychological condition of severe depression. The Italian writer Gadda in its *Journal of war and prison* reports a sentence written in a memory volume: "all men, taken away with violence from a military organization, the last form of association life perceived by them, now were pulverized; a multitude of entities, distant, extraneous, and hostile." [28].

Paradoxically in the trenches, the soldiers' psychological attitude, although remaining dramatic, was less frustrating: according to a mechanism of "positive adaptation", the soldiers could look for some consolation. They could hope in a future peace and waited with hope the next change of troops in the different front lines. On the other hand, during imprisonment a condition of uncertainty was predominant, the time was elusive and the perception of the end of the war remained immanent. The uncertainty paralyzed any kind of decision. The hunger, the risk of becoming sick made vulnerable the mind; obsessive thoughts became relevant when the camp was reached by news which were frequently distorted by the reports of those telling them, but these announcements were often not true. Like in the trenches, the episodes of psychosis occurring in prisoners often took the form of obsession against other

inmates. Someone developed a sense of guilt because of he became a prisoner, and in other cases the imprisonment was lived as a consequence of committed sins. At the end of the conflict, several survivors witnessed their experience, describing with many particulars the distressing mentation which troubled their long months of imprisonment [23-27].

Concerning the reported symptoms, some soldiers experienced forms of amnesia, related to a sort of emotional anesthesia. In other cases, these syndromes were attributed to the violent trauma previously suffered in the trenches (explosion of grenades, and violent, continued bombing [28]. A homosexual behavior was proportionally frequent among those who spent a very prolonged time in a prison camp, and one episode of group homosexuality was described [23, 28].

In the autumn of 1918, the course of the war was favourable for our country thanks to the third battle occurred on the Piave river; the final fight started on October 24, exactly one year after the defeat of Caporetto, and ended on November 4, with the armistice signed at Villa Giusti with Austria and Hungary. Previously, the Italian army resisted the last attack of the Austrian-German Empires which was started in June 1918 (the battle of the solstice), a particularly bloody offensive¹⁴ which developed between the Piave river and the Mount Grappa.

With the armistice signed in the city of Vittorio Veneto, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire rapidly released around 400,000 Italian prisoners. The release of prisoners from Germany occurred more slowly: the first convoys left towards Italy only in mid-December. In mid-January 1919, also veterans coming from Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey, started to reach Italy. The agreements coming from the armistice with Austria-Hungary included the liberation of 20,000 Italian prisoners per day starting from November 20, but the internal flaking of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and its dramatic conditions lasting since some time, especially those related to food availability, induced the military authorities to release the prisoners very quickly [29]. In Mauthausen on November 3 a true exodus

¹⁴ The Austrian-Hungarian Army lost almost 150,000 men, while Italian victims accounted for around 90,000 men.

of thousands of prisoners was favoured, while in Branau (Bohemia), the gates were destroyed already on November 2 [1]¹⁵. In a short time, this exodus caused a crisis of the receptive system in our country. Against these soldiers, a negative attitude was present, since the denigrating campaign developed in particular after the Caporetto defeat had left a sign: they have been depicted as traitors who surrendered to the enemy without resistance. An attitude of mistrust was common among politicians and military commands, due to the fear of potential subversive behaviours; it has to be underlined that the Bolshevik revolution was still ongoing, and the attitude to abandonment of prisoners posed the Italian establishment in a negative position. These suspicions led to a further isolation of former prisoners.

All these motivations, together with the willingness to process these veterans due to the suspect of desertion, convinced the government and the military commands to concentrate the soldiers coming from lagers in the same camps, which were previously used to gather the refugees in October and November 1917. The first idea, proposed by Cadorna, but shared also by Diaz, was that transferring all the repatriated soldiers to Lybia, but luckily the tumultuous arrival of former prisoners blocked this insane project [31]. The suspicion of betrayal was generalized, so that the same Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, after receiving a letter written by Ubaldo Comandini, the general commissioner for civil assistance and internal propaganda, wrote: "... I understand that we should distinguish those who in October 1917 could have surrendered to the enemy, but this statement does not authorize that all prisoners are considered in the same way. With this exception, which is easy to assess for soldiers who became prisoners before October and after November 1917, all the others have to be considered not subject to any suspicion. This situation regards 400,000 men, which later will be scattered throughout the entire country and it depends on us whether these soldiers

*will become apostles of patriotism or germs of dissolution*¹⁶ [1].

It was immediately evident that the objective of the Supreme Command was not to bring a moral and material support to the ex-prisoners who came back to Italy, but to subject them to questioning and start penal trials, with the purpose to establish how their behaviour had been. On November 12, 1918, the Supreme Command ordered that all soldiers, released from prison camps were immediately at disposition of the authorities. At the article no. 1, it was written: *The soldiers of any degree, made free from war imprisonment, within 24 hours, after entering the Italian territory or the ones under the control of the Italian Royal Army, has to appear before any military authority and to be sent to the concentration centres in Castelfranco Emilia, Gossolengo, Rivergano, Ancona, Bari*". At the article no. 3, it was written: *"The violation of obligations ratified in the previous articles is considered an episode of desertion and is punished with the penalty indicated in the article 145, second part, of the Penal Code of the Army."*¹⁷ [2].

On the ground of these premises, the second part of the veterans' ordeal, coming from prison camps, began. After a prolonged time of suffering (months, but in some cases years), another period of further hardship and disease started, together with spiritual and moral humiliations. All ex-prisoners were immediately interrogated by special investigation corps represented by officers from the Carabinieri and other units of the Royal Army. As already reported, the processes due to desertion, conducted inside the country at the end of the war (soldiers who left back of the front line, or who did not come back from a permission), were 150,429 out of a total of 162,526, while those started because of soldiers passed to the enemy were 2,662. The processes against soldiers, accused of desertion and who surrendered in the presence or in front of enemies were 9,472 [1]. All these facts occurred in a climate of a delu-

15 An Italian officer testified to the commission that: "... at midday of November 2, when the camp's gates were removed, the battalion called to put down the revolt, completely collapsed, when the unarmed prisoners started to throw to the Austrian soldiers the Italian biscuits. The bread represented the most certain weapon against the Austrian jailers." [1].

16 Telegram of November 15, 1918, from the central state Archives, Presidency of the Ministers' council, First World War.

17 This text was printed on a poster, which was stucked up in all cities, towns, and villages. This poster advice was followed by the Lieutenant Decree on November 21, 1918, which established the measures, concerning the obligation of presentation by Italian soldiers who had been released after war imprisonment [2].

sional “witch-hunt”. A sergeant together with his prison mates, at the border between Austria and Italy asked some bread to his compatriots and so writes in his witness: “... the General who rules the place gave us this answer: only lead was available for us ... we had to remain in that site overnight without any help, with our cold and our hunger, while we are exhausted: twenty of us have died during the night. This fact also has been communicated to the General, who answered that this was the destiny of homeland traitors.” [24].

Such a particularly severe position expressed by the high degree officers had not to be surprising. A decree of General Cadorna made public when he was still the chief of Italian army, reported: “After the end of the war, the death sentence will be also comminated to soldiers, who surrendered in a cowardly way and remained alive in the hands of the enemy.” It appears clear that based on this culture, the high military degrees were expected to give the above-mentioned answer to such a question. In the collection camps, there were some difficulties to start the health care activities properly, since they had not been planned in advance. The duty of magistrates and war tribunals was not aimed only to understand if the examined subject was a deserter, but also if the soldier could be prone to subversive purposes, after his leave.

There was a fear that many prisoners could have been instructed during their common imprisonment by mates who were attracted by the Bolshevik ideology and by the socialists which before the conflict had spent their efforts for avoiding the war (non-intervention). It has to be considered that in Russia the revolution was ongoing and in Germany the Spartachism revolutionary attempt was occurring. In other terms, everyone could be suspected, being an ex-prisoner, to have a hostile feeling against his homeland, the same homeland which demonstrated a clear indifference, about prisoners hold in imprisonment camps.

A paradoxical situation was clearly emerging, some hundred thousand of ex-prisoners, whose potential subversive potential for different causes the State was afraid of, came back in a situation of extremized control, which could not be maintained due to the lack of a proper organization. In the same time, the families protested: sons, fathers, and husbands could not come back home, while the nation euphorically celebrated the victory, a victory which had been paid with over



Figure 6 - Image published by the magazine “L’Illustrazione Italiana”, on November 1, 1914 (Museo Civico del Risorgimento, Bologna).

600,000 deaths and around one million between disables and wounded persons. The Figure 6 presents an evocative image printed on November 1, 1914, on the magazine named “L’Illustrazione Italiana”. The figure of a mother appears over a hill covered with crosses: this image anticipated the massacre which was knocking down the belligerent countries.

Moreover, with the end of the war, an extremely severe health care problem had to be faced: the country was in the grip of a severe influenza epidemic, the so called “Spanish - *Spagnola*” [32]. The concentration of soldiers in collection centres, where thousand of men were present¹⁸, was a

¹⁸ In the centre of Gossolengo (close to Piacenza), 65,500 ex-prisoners were encamped and in particular in a camp on the old bed of the Trebbia river 45,000 persons were present. In Castelfranco Emilia (in the province of Bologna), they were 101,968, whereas in Mirandola (close to Modena), 10,847 persons were kept [2].

prominent risk factor also for the general population. Fabio Montella observes that *"The promiscuity among soldiers and the not infrequent contacts with the general population almost certainly contributed to the huge diffusion of the Spanish influenza, which at the end of the year killed around 90 soldiers only in the town of Mirandola, and about 30 ones at Massa Finalese. In the town of Mirandola the great increase of mortality led to the saturation of the main cemetery and of that in the close small village at San Giacomo Roncole"* [2].

These soldiers, which had come back malnourished, at risk of or with an evident clinical tuberculosis, represented a health care load which could not be managed by the military organization, as well as eventual epidemics in the camps could not be avoided. Malaria also appeared (246 cases were notified), the scabies was very common, a case of smallpox occurred, as well as epidemics of typhoid fever and salmonellosis; due to the great human concentration, epidemic foci could easily spread to the general population. On the territory, the families protested, since their relatives did not come back, and the main risk was represented by the political forces which were in contrast with the government, where the socialist-revolutionary ideal were even stronger, could head this mass of people represented by former prisoners, which were disappointed, tired and escaped the control of military commands. The organization of camps showed several deficiencies. On November 18, General Badoglio ordered an inspection of camps located in the Emilia region, and the Lombardy region (Varese and Como), where the repatriated officers were present.

As he reported, at the end of his inspection on December 7, the General Ugo Sani sent by the supreme command to assess the situation, told that there was wasted material, an inadequate use of it, a wrong distribution of clothes, delays in the distribution of hot food rations, due to missing of the tins, and in some sections the amount of bread and meat was lower than that assigned. Ex-prisoners with lacerated and dirty clothes were found. Sani himself solicited the release of soldiers who had already been examined, and "rehabilitated", and therefore were able to leave the camp. The situation was greatly embarrassing and unjustified. The general Sani so described the camp of Gossolengo located on the ancient bed of the Trebbia river: *"... on the whole, the camp housed over 45,000 per-*

sons on the ancient gravel bed of a river, hygienically neglected, with its external security measures (Military Police, represented by Carabinieri with bayonet-fitting guns at every step and who followed every squad or corvée) gave the impression of a true prison camp. The officers were usually kept apart from the troops (...) When I was on the place, I gave order to change both system and mode of action (...), and I underlined that the troops should not be considered as a mass of dangerous prisoners, but a large number of Italian soldiers who had already faced a cruel destiny. Whether some investigation had been required, an impartial treatment had to be ensured, in order to stop damaging the dignity of men and soldiers; from a form of a camp, their organization should be moved to that of barracks (where possible), allowing the use of Alpine tents, as an exception. Finally, officers had to live always close to their troops [33]. The health care situation of this last camp was worrying: between the end of October 1918 and January 1919, 26 deaths due to influenza were recorded in Gossolengo; finally, between the end of October 1918 and the month of December the number of military prisoners was significantly reduced, and in mid-January 1919, the camp was closed [2].

The centre of recruitment of Castelfranco Emilia covered an area among the provinces of Modena, Bologna and Reggio Emilia; from a health care point of view, a hospitalization was guaranteed by six hospitals scattered in the close towns of the Po river valley, who ensured a total of 597 beds. However, patients could be also sent to other hospitals in the region. At the end of October, only in the area of Modena 10,532 cases of influenza have been notified, with 378 deaths, but also the appearance of diphtheria and one case of smallpox caused more and more alarm. It appears evident how the situation was dangerous for both prisoners and civilians. The return to a normal status was not rapid. The demobilization of the army was conditioned by many different factors. Shortly after the end of the war, the soldiers belonging to the three oldest classes of age obtained an unlimited leave: these soldiers included those who were born in the years 1874, 1875, and 1876. They were followed by those born in 1879, 1880 e 1881, who ceased the service on November 24. Finally, on December 13 the soldiers born in the years 1882, 1883 and 1884 had their unlimited leave. Before the end of the year, also younger soldiers of the class 1900 and those belonging to particular scenarios (the disabled ones, those suffering from tra-

choma, all persons who were deemed necessary for the resumption of the country, *i.e.* officials and employees, mayors and municipal personnel), for a comprehensive number of 1,400,000 men. Between the months of January and March 1919, all men who have born in the years 1885, 1886, and 1887, returned to a civilian life, together with other men belonging to particular categories. Starting from this time, the demobilization became slower, because of two different motivations: the peace negotiations were expected to take place in Paris and the government wanted to face the Jugoslavia in a condition of improved strength.

The second worrying situation was related to the coming back at home of around 1.5 million soldiers who were still part of the army: relevant social-economic problems were expected, since the majority of them were unemployed. On July 1, 1919, 1,688,000 men were still part of the Italian army, mostly concentrated in the Veneto and close regions. With the advent of the Nitti government, one million men were sent back at home in only two months. During early August the results of the Commission, which had investigated the causes of the defeat at Caporetto, were published. They made evident the responsibilities of the high military command; actually, the theory of a mass desertion sustained by the general Cadorna was significantly downsized. Every single examined officer had to write down a memorial regarding the mode of imprisonment, so that the Commission could account on informations coming from around 20,000 depositions. When these memories are examined, it may be recognized that the great majority of corps initially fought against the enemies. Later, in the days following October 24th, when the soldiers became tired and were surrounded, they surrendered against a very well organized and prepared enemy.

It seems evident that the empasse in the management of soldiers who were still blocked by all trials for a potential desertion had to be overcome, so that on September 2, 1919, an amnesty was granted. This amnesty covered all those who were sentenced up to 10 years of imprisonment, while the penalty was reduced for those with a longer time of punishment. The processes due to desertion still open were 470,000 (predominantly young emigrants who did not answer the call-up papers). Sixty thousand soldiers remained imprisoned, out of 210,000 processes concluded with

a prison sentence, while 150,000 persons had their sentence suspended during the war; as a consequence, around 20,000 ex-soldiers were still imprisoned [1,2]. However, the situation still penalized ex-prisoners. Only in April 1920, the money due to the imprisonment period was delivered to the soldiers, since during the climate of suspicion of the year 1919 this economic return were not assigned. The country and its liberal political class at the government passed many difficulties due to the maximalist revolutionary pressure, and the subversive "squadristo" which will lead at the end of the period 1919-1922, to the fascist dictatorship, after the "march towards Rome" carried out by Mussolini and his supporters.

Many war veterans were protagonists in these times, and being careful observers, testified and wrote around the facts following the defeat of Caporetto [34]. The feeling of disappointment developed after the lack of recognition of veterans, and the abandonment of ex-prisoners in the Austrian-German prison camps, heavily conditioned the tumultuous historical course of these years.

Acknowledgements

The Authors thank Dott. Otello Sangiorgi and Dott.ssa Mirtide Gavelli (Museo del Risorgimento di Bologna), who kindly made available documentation and illustrative material included in the present article.

The authors' contributions are as follows:

S.S. conceived the study and coordinated the search activity of colleagues and the preparation of the first draft of the manuscript; **M.R.** and **F.S.** performed the literature search, identified and screened the articles, contributed to the writing of the final draft of the manuscript and commented on the drafts.

Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest to declare.

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