

ITALIAN-SPEAKING AUSTRIAN CITIZENS ON THE EASTERN FRONT (1914–1918). EXPLORING THE EAST IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

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Abstract

The group of Italian-speaking citizens of the Habsburg Empire living in Trentino, a small region located at the western border of the Empire, is an excellent example of the interruption of everyday life caused by the war. Literacy was widespread in this small region. This allowed women and men at war to write their own memories of the conflict on notebooks, diaries, and letters. Such writings became frequent after traumatic events (imprisonment, displacement, and call to arms).

Significantly, the war experiences of these Italian-speaking citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire mainly concern the Eastern front, where men were sent to fight (Galicia, Bukovina), where they were taken prisoner (Russian Empire), and where women, elderly, and children had been displaced (Bohemia, Moravia). Almost all female writers were young.

This paper intends to shed light on the war experience of these three categories of people who left autobiographical and personal writings. The analysis of these writings makes it possible to assess how the relationship with the regional space and “the other” changes from time to time (with host populations in the case of refugees; populations of other regions of the Empire in the case of soldiers; rural residents of Russia in the case of prisoners of war), and how these perceptions affect group self-representation.

Keywords: First World War, Trentino, refugees, POWs, diary, Galicia, Habsburg Empire, Eastern Front, minorities.

Introduction

In the last three decades, growing attention to the war experience of refugees, POWs, and civilians as objects of investigation for scholars dealing with First World War has been noticed. Access to new archival sources and various research methods have shown that the war experience of these groups cannot be analyzed by relying exclusively on official documentation. This evidence, now accepted for the Western front, is even more interesting when examining the Eastern one: here, the mobility of the frontline has led to the imprisonment of soldiers, the occupation of large regions, and the expulsion of civilians.¹

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¹ Uta Hinz, *Gefangen im Großen Krieg. Kriegsgefangenschaft in Deutschland 1914–1921* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2006); Verena Moritz and Hannes Leidinger, *Zwischen Nutzen und*

The group of Italian-speaking citizens of the Habsburg Empire living in Trentino, a small region located at the western border of the Empire, is an excellent example of the interruption of everyday life caused by the war. Despite being located in the extreme western periphery of the Empire, Trentino played an important strategic-military role. During the First World War, this area became a battlefield after Italy's entry into the war. The region was thus subject to evident militarization processes starting from 1914 and after mid-1915 when the frontline crossed the southern districts of the region. Some areas were subjected to military occupation: the southern part of the region was taken by Italian troops; the northern one was administered by the Austrian military authorities.²

The Italian-speaking population residing in the province, which amounted to 380,000 inhabitants before the outbreak of the war, suffered an evident exodus: over 72,000 adult males were enrolled in the Austro-Hungarian army and sent to fight in Galicia and Serbia; about 105,000 refugees were displaced to the internal regions of Austria-Hungary and Italy; over 4,500 internees from Trentino were imprisoned in both states; more than 7,000 people from Trentino emigrated to Italy between the summer of 1914 and May 1915, as political exiles. Many of these people left written records about these experiences.³

Bedrohung. Die russischen Kriegsgefangenen in Österreich (1914–1921) (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe, 2005); Reinhard Nachtigal, *Kriegsgefangenschaft an der Ostfront 1914 bis 1918. Literaturbericht zu einem neuen Forschungsfeld* (Oxford: Frankfurt a. M.; P. Lang, 2005); Alon (Iris) Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War. Captivity on the Eastern front* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2002); Annette Becker, *Les cicatrices rouges, 14–18. France et Belgique occupées* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre, 1914–1918. Populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre* (Paris: Éd. Noësis, 1998); Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a world at war, 1914–1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Matthew Stibbe, "Civilian internment and civilian internees in Europe, 1914–1920", *Immigrants and Minorities* 26, no.1 (2008): 49–81; Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total war and everyday life in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); P. Gatrell and L. Zhvanko eds., *Europe on the move. Refugees in the era of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

² Nicola Labanca, "Introduzione. Per una storia transnazionale", in *La guerra italo-austriaca (1915–1918)*, ed. Nicola Labanca and Oswald Überegger (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 7–23; Diego Leoni, *La guerra verticale. Uomini, animali e macchine sul fronte di montagna 1915–1918* (Torino: Einaudi, 2015).

³ Claudio Ambrosi, *Vite internate. Katzenau, 1915–1917* (Trento: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, 2008); Quinto Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra. La memoria dei combattenti trentini (1914–1920)* (Trento: Il Margine, 2008); Simone Attilio Bellezza, *Tornare in Italia. Come i prigionieri trentini in Russia divennero italiani (1914–1920)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016); Nicola Fontana, *La regione fortezza. Il sistema fortificato del Tirolo. Pianificazione, cantieri e militarizzazione del territorio da Francesco I alla Grande Guerra* (Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 2016); Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra eds., *La città di legno. Profughi trentini in Austria (1915–1918)* (Trento: Temi, 1981); Alessandro Livio, "The Wartime Treatment of the Italian-Speaking Population in Austria-Hungary", *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 24, no. 2 (2017): 185–199; Fabrizio Rasera and Camillo Zadra, "Patrie lontane. La coscienza nazionale negli scritti dei soldati trentini 1914–1918", *Passato e presente* 14–15 (1987): 37–73.

Although there is no internationally renowned writer born in Trentino in this period – there is no such thing as an Italian-speaking Musil, for instance – literacy was widespread in this small region. This allowed women and men at war to write their own memories of the conflict on notebooks, diaries, and letters. Such writings became frequent after traumatic events (imprisonment, displacement, and call to arms). Starting from the nineties of the twentieth century, two archives based in Trento and Rovereto began to collect a significant number of the testimonies of these groups, collecting hundreds of diaries and memoirs.⁴

Significantly, the war experiences of these Italian-speaking citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire mainly concern the Eastern front, where men were sent to fight (Galicia, Bukovina), where they were taken prisoner (Russian Empire), and where women, elderly, and children had been displaced (Bohemia, Moravia). Almost all female writers were young. This paper intends to shed light on the war experience of these three categories of people who left autobiographical and personal writings. The analysis of these writings makes it possible to assess how the relationship with the regional space and “the other” changes from time to time (with host populations in the case of refugees; populations of other regions of the Empire in the case of soldiers; rural residents of Russia in the case of prisoners of war), and how these perceptions affect group self-representation.

Context

Trentino, at the outbreak of the First World War, was a region on the outskirts of the Habsburg Empire, characterized by strong economic backwardness. The region was strictly Catholic; the southern portion of the Land Tyrol was inhabited almost exclusively by Italians, except for a small minority of Germans residing in the two main cities (Trento and Rovereto), mainly involved in military activities (officials, engineers, and technicians). Seasonal migration, prompted by low incomes and poor agricultural harvests, was widespread. Primary school was a central element of social life, and almost all the residing population at the beginning of the twentieth century was literate.⁵ Mobility outside the region was

⁴ Quinto Antonelli, *La guerra delle donne*, to be found at <https://storiaefuturo.eu/larchivio-della-scrittura-popolare-della-fondazione-museo-storico-del-trentino/>. Accessed November 2, 2022. Fabio Caffarena, *Lettere dalla Grande guerra. Scritture del quotidiano, monumenti della memoria, fonti per la storia. Il caso italiano* (Milano: Unicopli, 2005). Federico Mazzini, ‘*Cose de laltro mondo*’. *Una cultura di guerra attraverso la scrittura popolare trentina 1914–1918* (Firenze: ETS, 2013); Federico Mazzini, *Rappresentazione e realtà nell’esperienza dei soldati italiani*, in *La guerra italo-austriaca (1915–18)*, ed. Nicola Labanca and Oswald Überegger (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 165–186; Luciana Palla, “Scritture di donne. La memoria delle profughe trentine nella prima guerra mondiale”, *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe* 1 (2004): 45–52.

⁵ Andrea Leonardi (a cura di), *La regione Trentino Alto Adige/Südtirol nel XX secolo*, vol. 2, *Economia. Le traiettorie dello sviluppo* (Trento: Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, 2009); Andrea

not common: except seasonal migration, 90% of the local population used to marry into the same district where they were born. In other regions of the Empire, this rate was lower than 50%.⁶

The question that arises is how this compact Italian population came into contact with other linguistic groups since it is strictly Catholic and not quite inclined to extra-regional movements, and secondly, to understand if this contact affects group perception. The main point is that among the economic, legal, and social consequences of the war that broke out in this region after Italy entered the war, one of the most obvious is the forced displacement of about 105,000 inhabitants by the Austrian (77,000 evacuees, displaced towards the Austrian, Bohemian, and Moravian *Länder*) and Italian authorities (29,000 evacuees, displaced southwards).⁷ At the same time, about 72,000 men from Trentino had been conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian Army and sent mainly to the Eastern Front, where a substantial number, approximately 12,000, died. Others were taken prisoner *en masse* by the Tsarist army (15,000 prisoners). Overall, a region with fewer than 400,000 inhabitants had seen its population halve in just a few months. For a substantial part of the region's population, the experience of war forced peasant masses to contact new groups in different linguistic and religious contexts, inside and, at times, outside the state border. These contacts lasted for many years under difficult economic circumstances, sometimes without the necessary mediation by the state or military authorities.⁸

The war, therefore, intervened as a powerful element in fragmenting the group experiences that characterized pre-war Trentino. These points concern self-perception and group self-representation, as well as issues related to belonging and loyalties.⁹ The fact that the protagonists of these events leave letters, diaries,

Leonardi, *L'economia di una regione alpina. Le trasformazioni economiche degli ultimi due secoli nell'area trentino-tirolese* (Trento: ITAS, 1996); Maria Garbari and Andrea Leonardi (a cura di), *Storia del Trentino*, vol. 5, *L'età contemporanea 1803–1918* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2004); Casimira Grandi (a cura di), *Emigrazione: memorie e realtà* (Trento: Provincia autonoma di Trento, 1990).

⁶ Helmut Rumpler and Martin Seger, *Die Habsburgermonarchie*, Band 9 *Soziale Strukturen*, 2. *Die Gesellschaft der Habsburgermonarchie im Kartenbild. Verwaltungs-, Sozial- und Infrastrukturen. Nach dem Zensus von 1910* (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 127.

⁷ Francesco Frizzera, *Cittadini dimezzati. Profughi trentini in Austria-Ungheria e in Italia (1914–1919)* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2018); Paolo Malni, "Fra due patrie. Profughi trentini e giuliani nella Grande Guerra", in *Trento e Trieste. Percorsi degli italiani d'Austria dal '48 all'annessione*, ed. Fabrizio Rasera (Rovereto: Osiride, 2014), 395–426; Laboratorio di storia di Rovereto, *Gli spostati. Profughi, Flüchtlinge, Uprchlíci. 1914–1919* (Trento: Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2015).

⁸ Bellezza, *Tornare in Italia*; Frizzera, *Cittadini dimezzati*; Claire Morelon, "L'arrivée des réfugiés de Galicie en Bohême pendant la Première Guerre mondiale: rencontre problématique et limites du patriotisme autrichien", *Histoire et Politique* 28, no. 1 (2016): 5–18.

⁹ Laurence Cole and Daniel Unowsky, eds., *The Limits of Loyalty. Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007); Laurence Cole, "Differentiation or Indifference? Changing Perspectives on National Identification in the Austrian Half of the Habsburg Monarchy", in *Nationhood from Below. Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. Maarten van Ginderachter and Marnix Beyen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 98–114.

and memorials allows us to analyze the big issue of the contact with the “other” within and outside the Empire. For reasons of space and considering the subjectivity of the sources, which describe personal situations, the analysis does not take gender differences into account, although this point could have been interesting. Nevertheless, these mentioned circumstances are sufficient to understand how a population that perceived itself as Western-European – even if it lived in conditions of extreme poverty, in a border region characterized by a low level of industrialization and urbanization and decreased yields – relates to the ethnically and religiously diverse “East” at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The use of subjective sources, like diaries, requires caution in evaluating general processes, starting from a limited number of records and accounts. It is thus evident that it is not possible to reconstruct a general picture starting just from ego documents that can provide only a fragmented view on the entire situation. Even the authorities were unable to conduct assessments on refugee status or POW’s displacement and living conditions for their own control purposes, although they could resort to censorship or other means of surveillance. In conclusion, this paper is not a statistical booklet and does not suggest general answers to the issues related to group perception. Nevertheless, by using subjective and direct sources, like letters, diaries, and autobiographical memoirs,¹⁰ with their complexity and unique experiences, we believe it is possible to outline an interesting picture, which reveals changes in motion and the inadequacy of monolithic interpretative frameworks.

How does the Trentino soldiers represent Galicia

On the Galician battlefield, the Italian-speaking soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Army meet both the Russian Army and the local population. Lifestyle and behavior of the Russian enemy were reported in diaries and were often assigned to entire ethnic communities without particular distinctions. After their first advance and subsequent rapid retreat within the state border due to the Russian counterattack, Habsburg soldiers were fighting on the imperial territory. However, they were not accustomed to Polish and Ruthenian peasants’ behavior and traditions. The latter are described through the *topoi* of abundance of parasites, the promiscuity of people and animals, as affected by poverty, with dirty clothing and poor homes. In written records, it is common to encounter very strong prejudices related to the Jewish population, which echoes the anti-semitic Catholic press

¹⁰ A substantial part of the diaries is written in elementary Italian, syntactically incorrect, with the inclusion of words and dialectal constructs. The English translations take up the syntactic and grammar of the original, resulting in some passages of not very coherent language due to adherence to the sources.

available in Trentino and Tyrol from the late Middle Ages onwards.¹¹ The more than 100 letters sent by Italian-speaking soldiers to their relatives at home and then published during the first months of the war by the local Catholic newspaper “Il Trentino” are clearly revealing these aspects:

“No more cheers at the stations, but long, messy beards of Jews in disheveled, shiny cassocks, people greedy for money, incapable of a feeling of pity for so many unfortunate poor soldiers.” [2.11.1914]

“All wear a black robe, often greasy and bisected; in addition to dominating trade, they are masters of vast territories, woods, and meadows. The rest of the population lives rather in misery; some are forced to emigrate.” [5.02.1915]

“In a street flanked by similarly low houses, there is the synagogue, and there, in the morning, the Jews gather to pray, and in their lamentations they make such an uproar that is also known to us in the phrase: it seems like the ghetto of the Jews. It resembles walking in Palestine two thousand years ago.” [13.04.1915]¹²

The presentation of the Galician villages through the filter of anti-Semitism and a civilizing tendency is not the only aspect of interest arising from the letters. Many of these not only focus on the local population but provide a simplified judgment of the Russians, starting from their behavior, exemplified by the dynamics of occupation and aggression. It is no surprise to find letters of Trentino soldiers that convey the image of the Russian enemy, understood as a collective entity, described as rough and violent by nature due to its “Sarmatic” origin. A few letters extensively describe the scenes of the looting of Galician centers: the killing of civilians, violence against women, and violence against Jews. These are acts taken as a sign of the ethnic and religious diversity of the enemy compared to the civilian peoples of the Empire.

The descriptions of Ruthenian and Polish people are often disrespectful, and there is some sarcasm and contempt in the depiction of their houses and customs, such as the presence of an excess of sacred images on the walls, attributed to dubious religious devotion. The impression one gets is that “Galicia was a land to

¹¹ Domenica Primerano (a cura di), *L'invenzione del colpevole. Il 'caso' di Simonino da Trento, dalla propaganda alla storia* (Trento: Museo Diocesano Tridentino e Temi Editrice, 2019); Regarding anti-semitism in Trentino Catholic culture: Quinto Antonelli, *Fede e lavoro. Ideologia e linguaggio di un universo simbolico. Stampa cattolica trentina fra '800 e '900* (Rovereto, 1981), 70–72.

¹² Rasera and Zadra, *Patrie lontane*, 37–73. Original Italian text of the letters: “Non più evviva alle stazioni, ma barbe lunghe, incolte di ebrei in sdruscite, lucide talari, gente avida di denaro, incapace di un sentimento di pietà per tanti poveri malcapitati” [2.11.1914]; “tutti portano una tunica nera, spesso unta e bisunta; oltre a dominare il commercio sono padroni di vasti territori, di boschi e di prati. Il rimanente della popolazione giace piuttosto nella miseria, parte è costretta ad emigrare” [5.02.1915]; “In una via fiancheggiata da case basse uguali vi è la sinagoga e lì la mattina si radunano a pregare i giudei e nelle loro lamentazioni fanno un chiasso tale che è noto anche da noi nella frase: pare il ghetto degli ebrei. Pare di passeggiare in Palestina avanti duemila anni” [13.04.1915].

be abandoned, too far away, monotonously poor and filthy, where the Ruthenians, Poles, and Jews were too different from being fellow citizens”.¹³ The Trentino historians Rasera and Zadra got this feeling by reading dozens of diaries published over many years by the Italian War History Museum and the Trentino Historical Museum Foundation in the book series *Scritture di guerra*. This feeling can be summed up in the words of Guerrino Botteri: “All mud, mud, mud! Mud in the water, in the air, in the streets, in the meadows, in the fields, everywhere. It also seems that people are made of mud”.¹⁴

Leafing through the diaries, the notes written by other witnesses do not change, neither in their wording nor in the general impression that Galicia leaves on the writer. Angelo Paoli and Umberto Artel wrote the following:

*“On the 20th [of August] in the morning, we arrived in Galicia, we got off the train, we walked for an hour, then they stopped us in a little village; I was amazed to see those huts with thatched roofs. After I had a bit of freedom, I went here and there in the village; I also went into some houses. They had a kitchen, a bedroom, and a stable altogether, the people were like bears, very ignorant and undeveloped, and I was scared to see in what villages we had arrived.”*¹⁵

*“The country is as filthy as ever. One sinks into it in a black and muddy quagmire up to above the ankle. Trash traces everywhere. The inhabitants, as dirty and filthy as ever, give off a sickening acrid smell, they stink. The houses are made of quagmire with thatched roofs. There are half-naked women with filthy black legs. Up to their breasts, they have the stigmata of dirt. God, what a horror! We wonder among ourselves if these villages are Austrian or barbarian.”*¹⁶

¹³ Fabrizio Rasera and Camillo Zadra, “Patrie lontane. La coscienza nazionale negli scritti dei soldati trentini (1914–18)”, in *Sui campi di Galizia 1914–1917. Gli italiani d’Austria e il fronte orientale: uomini, popoli, culture nella guerra europea*, ed. G. Fait (a cura di), 2nd ed. (Rovereto: Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, 2004) 331. [Extended version of the essay published in “Passato e presente”].

¹⁴ Diary of Guerrino Botteri, in *Scritture di guerra: 8. Guerrino Botteri, Vigilio Caola, Giovanni Lorenzetti, Valentino Maestranzi, Giuseppe Scarazzini* (Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della Guerra, 1998), 16–17. Original Italian version: “Tutto fango, fango, fango! Fango nell’acqua, nell’aria, nelle vie, nei prati, nei campi, dappertutto. Sembra anche che la gente sia di fango.”

¹⁵ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 57. Original Italian version: “il 20 di mattina arrivammo in Galizia la scendemmo dal treno facemmo un’ora di marcia poi ci hanno fermati la in un paesello al vedere quelle capanne coi tetti di paglia io restai stupefatto dopo che si a avuto un po’ di libertà andai di qua di la per il paese andai anche in alcune case la là c’era la cucina camera da letto e stalla tutto assieme la gente erano come orsi gente molto ignoranti e senza nessuno sviluppo io mi spaventai al vedere in che paesi si era arrivato.” Record taken from the diary of Angelo Paoli.

¹⁶ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 58, a record from the diary of Umberto Artel. Original Italian version: “Paese sudicio quanto mai. Vi si sprofonda in un pantano nero e limaccioso, fino sopra alla caviglia. Ovunque impronte di immondizie. Gli abitanti, sporchi e sudici quanto mai, emanano un acro odore nauseabondo, fanno schifo. Le case fatte di pantano coi tetti di paglia. Le donne mezze ignude con le gambe nere e luride. Fino sui seni esse hanno le stimate della sporcizia. Dio che orrore. Ci chiediamo fra noi se questi paesi siano austriaci o barbari.”

This attitude is somewhat surprising, as Galician women distribute water and bread to Austrian soldiers leaving trains.¹⁷ In addition, the people of Trentino came from an agricultural countryside, poor and full of pellagra, a disease related to malnutrition, typical of an emigration region, with rather high infant mortality.¹⁸ However, witnesses only perceive appearances. For soldiers, there is no time to relate to the local population. They knew almost nothing about Galicia before leaving their region. They knew what Galicia was, who lived there, and where the region actually was only through scant notions in school books. Private Somavilla, at the dawn of his departure for the front, gives an account in a few sentences:

*“We are on the eve of departure! Do we have to leave, and where are we heading to? To a country unknown to everyone, which no one knew how to describe to us, neither the climate nor the terrain, nor the customs, nor the temperature, nor the temperament and condition of the inhabitants; moreover, nobody knew that language.”*¹⁹

The presence of Jews made these records even more negative. There is no clear distinction between Poles, Ruthenians, and other inhabitants of the region in the eyes of Trentino soldiers traveling by train and crossing villages. Nevertheless, the overall impression is striking: the Italian-speaking soldier felt like they were in a foreign region. The appearance of the Jews, often mentioned in their homeland but never seen before, arouses immediate rejection: “We received permission from our superiors to go to the city [Grodok], and then immediately everyone smoked outside, we could not see anything but soldiers running around; it looked like a real anthill, we found what we wanted from those evil Jews, they even had that malice of not wanting paper money, they only received gold and silver, they were afraid of being cheated”.²⁰ Guerrino Botteri, already mentioned, reports the same records, as

¹⁷ Giacomo Somavilla, quoted in Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 58: “Then from those wild people, we received some eggs, and with them, we restored ourselves a little. After sunset we received food, somehow we set out to spend the night there, in those miserable hovels built other than with wood and street shovel”. Original Italian version: “Poi da quella gente selvatica ricevemo alcune uova e con esse ci ristorammo un poco, dopo il tramonto del sole ricevemmo managgio, a qualche maniera ci mettemmo a passare la notte là in quei miseri tuguri costruitio altro che con legno e palta delle strade.”

¹⁸ Italo Prosser, “Guido de Probizer (1849–1929) e la lotta alla pellagra”, in *Atti dell’Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati* 252 (2002): 255–283

¹⁹ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 58, from the diary of Giacomo Somavilla. Original Italian version: “Siamo alla vigilia della partenza! Dovremo partire e per dove? Per un paese ad ognuno sconosciuto, che nessuno sapeva descriverci né il clima né il terreno, non i costumi né la temperatura né il temperamento e condizione degli abitatori, perdipiù nessuno sapeva quella lingua.”

²⁰ Antonelli (a cura di), *Scritture di guerra n. 3: Emilio Fusari Giacinto Giacomolli Fioravante Gottardi* (Trento: Museo storico in Trento; Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 1995). Diary of Emilio Fusari. Original Italian version: “Ricevemmo la libertà dai nostri superiori di

we can read in many other diaries (Giuseppe Gremes, Gouseppe Morandini, Giacomo Dompieri, and many others):

*“These Jews are a singular race. Greasy with the strong, hypocritically weepy with those in charge, they become griffins with those who honestly want to pay. They are hyenas with everyone who becomes their debtor. And they make money from everything and everyone. They sell hot water for tea and coffee [...] they sell honor and reputation and [...] even their daughters, just to make money! They are the strangling snare of Poles who let themselves get drunk and killed.”*²¹

The permanence of the Trentino soldiers in Galicia is characterized by constant displacements, a difficult relationship with civilians, deep retreats, and very high mortality and imprisonment rates: of the enlisted 72,000 people from Trentino, 12,000 died mainly in the first months of the conflict, and another 15,000 were taken prisoner by the Tsarist army. The meager information we get from reading the diaries is, therefore, more the embodiment of a prejudice than the confirmation of an objective and reasoned analysis. In their superficiality, in any case, these annotations suggest something about the expectations of the people of Trentino once they came in contact with the eastern regions of the Empire.

How does the Trentino soldier perceive Russians

About 15,000 Trentino soldiers were captured as POWs and sent deep into Russia between the summer of 1914 and mid-1916. There, they lived highly varied experiences. They stayed in large POW camps for many months and were moved several times from one camp to another. Almost all of them inevitably had to work in the countryside for a while during the long experience of imprisonment, which sometimes extended beyond 1917 up to 1919.²²

Many witnesses of this experience left written traces of this stage of their military service also because the experience of imprisonment allows a lot of free time

andare per città [Grodok] quando piaceva e allora subito tutti fumo fuori, non si vedeva girare altro che soldati pareva un vero formicaio, la si trovava di quello che si voleva da quelli ebrei malvagi che avevano perfino quella malizia di non volere soldi in carta ricevevano solo oro e argento avevano paura di restare imbrogliati.”

²¹ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 58. Original Italian version: “Una razza singolare questi ebrei. Untuosi coi forti, ipocritamente piangenti con chi comanda, diventano grifagni con chi onestamente vuole pagando. Sono iene con tutti quelli che diventano loro debitori. E traggono denaro da tutto e da tutti. Vendono acqua calda per the e caffè ... vendono onore e reputazione e ... perfino le figliuole, pur di accumulare denaro! Essi sono il laccio strangolatore de’ polacchi che si lasciano ubriacare e uccidere.”

²² See about that experience the already mentioned books of Antonelli and Simone Attilio Bellezza.

for writing. However, these memoirs and diaries are written by witnesses who in many cases do not know each other. The discussed issues and even the content of the diaries tend to overlap, as if there was an underground circulation of reflections and impressions among the former combatants. In one case, there is even a poem titled *Uses and customs of the Siberians / Uses and customs of the Russian peasants*, of over 200 lines, which can be found in numerous diaries written by authors who have no personal relationship with each other. To some extent, it is a sum of how the POWs from Trentino perceived the Russians, described in some negative or degrading images due to satirical analogies depicting the daily life of their hosts. The main topic, analyzed with sarcasm and irony, concerns clothing, housing, hygiene, food, religious customs, and education. All aspects are described through a filter of superiority, typical of the Western observer, which contrasts with the condition of a prisoner who does not even have his freedom and who also depends on the charity and benevolence of the Russian peasants:

“At first glance, we are undecided / whether they are people or bears / [...] / So you can see them lying on the ground / men, women, pigs, and quarries / boys and girls of all ages / ducks and geese that are here / [...] / Dirty women knead bread / without even washing their hands / men and women except for their eyes / their whole body is full of lice / Everyone is used to eating from a single plate / and using their hands instead of a fork / and if their hands are dirty with food / they rub their hands on their heads / [...] / As for reading and writing, and counting, / there are very few who know how to do it / and it is difficult in every village / to find 10 who can read / [...] / There are a few schools and very distant / thirty kilometers and even more / We cannot blame them all / because it is their Tsar’s fault / By religion they are Orthodox / superstition right down to the bone / [...] / Inside this heat, they sweat / until they run out of breath.”²³

These are notes that are repeated, without distinction, in many other diaries, also in a prosaic way. Sebastiano Leonardi records as a scandalized observer the ease with which young and old women, married or single, had relationships with different men, as if this were a sort of moral habit in Russia.

²³ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 177ss. Original Italian version: “A prima vista si è sul forse / se l’ sia persone o sia orsi / Così si vede in terra butai / omeni donne porchi cavai / putei putele de ogni età / anedre e ochi che fan qua qua / Le donne sporche l’ en pasta el pan / senza lavarse ne pur le man / omeni e donne for che nei oci / I g’ha tutte el corp pien de pioci / Tutti dan piatto mangiar i usa / e per pironi le man le usa / e se col cibo sporche le resta / i se le frega poi su la testa / Legger e skriver e contezzar / Ghe ne ben pochi che sappia far / E difficil in ogni paess / che sappia legger trovarne des / Ghe poche scole e le è distanti / trenta khm e anca piu tanti / Tutta la colpa no se ghe la pol dar / che la piu tanta el la ga el so Zar / Di religion gli è ortodossi / superstizion fin ente gli ossi / En de sto caldo i sta a sudar / finché il fiato ghe ven a mancar.” The same poem is quoted by Simone Attilio Bellezza, *Tornare in Italia*.

Educated in harsh Catholic discipline, according to a very strict sexual ethics, these habits shocked the observer. He described Christmas celebrations in these words:

“From the time they start breakfast at home, until they go to sleep, it is always a continuous eating and drinking, singing and scuffling, getting dirty, trivial words and jokes that are more than bestial; the wife of the one kisses the husband of the other; the husband of the first puts his hands on the wife of a third, so that seeing (being sincere) disgusts you.”²⁴

Other witnesses are less modest, but they do not fail to note in their diaries, with surprise, the same behaviors, as if they had to take into account the events and non-ordinary things they see or encounter. Guido Biasi reports from Penza that “we had sweet and passionate encounters made of whispers, caresses, embraces, abandonments, in the discreet shelter of haystacks and night shadows”.²⁵ The overall impression, anyway, does not differ.

Beyond Catholic morality and the shock of sexuality, a certain civilizing prejudice emerges, which hides a presumption of superiority, even in the degrading condition of imprisonment. This is even more surprising considering the starting condition of the writers, who certainly did not come from a highly developed or industrialized area. Nonetheless, elementary education and knowledge of more advanced agricultural and hygienic practices alone were considered a mark of civilization, which categorized populations regardless of the conditions of actual hospitality, which even in the Russian *isba* are more decorous than in the camps. Giuseppe Gremes, for instance, wrote: “At first it seemed strange to be there alone, you couldn’t understand anything, you had to work a lot, but at least you got enough to eat three times a day, and to sleep well enough; those people used to sleep all in one room because they don’t have another place, all together, old and young, women and men; they have a large table, and everyone throws themselves there, one after the other; sometimes they go to sleep dressed, with a pillow under their head and nothing else”.²⁶ The best transposition of these concepts is again entrusted to another poem in verses, which appears in a diary:

²⁴ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 182. Original Italian version: “Da quando incominciano la colazione a casa propria fino a quando vanno a dormire è sempre un continuo mangiare e bere, cantare e baruffare, far sporchezza, triviali parole e scherzi si può dire più che bestiali, la moglie dell’uno bacia il marito dell’altra il marito della prima mette le mani addosso alla moglie di un terzo, cosicché il vedere (essendo sinceri) ti fa ribrezzo.”

²⁵ Antonelli, *I dimenticati della Grande Guerra*, 183. Original Italian version: “Erano incontri dolci e appassionati fatti di bisbigli, di carezze, di amplessi, di abbandoni, al riparo discreto dei pagliai e delle ombre notturne.”

²⁶ FMST [Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino], APS [Archivio Scrittura popolare], *Giuseppe Gremes, Memoria autobiografica*, “Kaunckr - 14 - 12 - 1914-15. Jager - Giuseppe Gremes 3 Reggimento dei cacciatori Imp. Tirolesi prigioniero in Russia - Ag Settembre - nella città di 1914 - Kaunckr 1915” Original Italian version: “Da prima ci pareva una certa roba essere li soli, non si capiva gnente ocoreva lavorare tutto a matti, almeno si riceveva tre volte al giorno da mangiare

*"I'm here to tell you / about a small village called Lar / the center of misery / in central Siberia // I will tell you about its inhabitants / they are malignant and ignorant / pretending to be Christian / and are worse than Muslims // in the evening, when it is dark / when they put on their night cap / they throw themselves on the ground / like the bear and the panther // When they get up in the morning / they are more tired than before / and even those rough peasants / are full of lice // I don't know if this is healthy / in all the houses there is a bathroom / and on the eve of all the holidays / the whole family is washed there // We Austrian soldiers / we are their prisoners / and we always talk / about their skinny diet // They tell us we're crazy / because we wipe our noses in handkerchiefs / instead, for this purpose / they use the hem of their shirt // around their head they have a handkerchief / so that they look like little bears / and they all look the same / they are dirtier than pigs // Look, there is an old mom / who looks like a cat who has been beaten up / She is alone making bread / and is barefoot like a dog // They have beautiful countryside, I tell you / they could be rich people, / but they are so rough / they do not know how to take care of themselves // but I think / it must have been the Lord / who does not let these unsuitable people learn anything."*²⁷

In particular, among the distinctive elements of the difference between the Trentino peasants, prisoners in the Russian countryside, and the local population, the issue of school education frequently stands out, which is proudly taken as an element of moral superiority. Francesco Matteotti describes it well:

"Seeing that village chief I had to stop the laughter! First of all, he had to borrow ink from a neighbor; then he was looking for the pen, but he was not able to find it, and after a long search, [...] he also had to send someone for the pen. Having had what he needed, he sat down at the table with a certain importance, like someone who has to write a long and complicated protocol,

abbastanza, e da dormire anche abbastanza bene, quella gente usavano dormire tutti in una camera perché altro posto non hanno, grandi e picocli donne ed omeni tutti assieme, hanno un tavvolone e là si buttano tutti un dietro l'altro, a volte vanno vestiti con un cuscino sotto la testa e gnente altro."

²⁷ Bellezza, *Tornare in Italia*, 111: "son qui per ve parlar / di un paesotto chiamato lar / focolar della miseria / nella centrale della Siberia // vi dirò dei suoi abitanti / son maligni ed ignoranti prettendon d'esser cristiani / e son peggio dei musulmani // alla sera quando è not / i se mette attorno el so capòt / i se getta già per terra come l'orso e la panterra // Quando i leva la mattina / son stanchi più di prima / e anco quei por tamocchi (rozzo contadino) / son pieni e colmi di pidocchi // questo poi non so se è sano / in tutte le case vi è il suo bagno / e delle feste la vigilia / lava tutta quanta la famiglia //Noi austriaci cacciatori / siam loro prigionieri / abbiam sempre la parlar / del suo magrissimo mangar //A noi ne dis che non sen metti / a soffiari el nas nei fazzoletti / invece lori en tal guisa / i dopera el bech dela camisa //le done anca la festa / le voltà su demò la vèsta / e no le g'ha respet gnente / gnanca immezzo alla zent// intorno alla testa i g'ha en fazol / che par l'ors formigarol / i è lostessi tutti quanti / son sportchi più dei ruganti // vedi li la vecchia baba / che par na gatta scoada / liè la sola che la fa pan / la è descolza che par en can //i gaveria na bella chiesa / ma la sua non è na messa / è come i fussa un in sallon / non anno miga divozion // hanno delle campagne velo dico / pederia esser gente ricca / ma l'è tant na rozza gent / che noi sa rangiarse nient // ma come penso io / sarò il Sognore Iddio / che a sta mala gent / nol ghe lasa imparar gnent".

while it was only a matter of putting the date, the names of the 4 workers, and that of the bosses. It took him an hour to try to write and erase and go back to writing. Poor countries! How many ignorant people! And why? Because they don't have schools. Or if there are, they are 30, 40, or 60 km away. Therefore, one should not wonder about the people's ignorance but about those who govern them; instead of making war, the Tsar would do better to make schools and educate the people."²⁸

The second element of distinction, which reinforces the feeling of otherness and helps to strengthen the group perception of the Trentino prisoners in Russia, is represented by religion. This is a dissonant aspect compared to what was recorded for the Galician Jews, given that the participation of POWs in Orthodox religious ceremonies is not infrequent, in the absence of another religious comfort. However, there are sarcastic references to the excess of sacred images, the hiatus between general morality and actual devotion. Even in this case, one diaristic text among many describes these reflections:

"In this country, there is the Orthodox religion, but there is little devotion; they make many signs of the cross, I counted 40 times in a row, made by an old woman, always with a bow in front of a small picture of their founder, but in addition to this, they do nothing about religion; there is also a small beautiful church ... I have never seen my masters go there, and everyone in the village also goes to the sledding party."²⁹

In this way, a form of regional identity is strengthened, which is shaped by the relationship with the other. Before the war, this relationship was very often only alleged and theoretical; in this situation, it is defined by the differences in uses, customs, and agricultural practices.

²⁸ FMST, APS, *Francesco Matteotti, Diario*, "Le mie avventure nella guerra Austro-Russa 1914-1915". Original Italian version: "A veder quel capo villaggio doveti frenare le risa! Anzitutto dovette prendere l'inchiostro ad imprestito da qualche vicino; poi cercava la penna, ma non fu capace di trovarla, e dopo lungo cercare, ... dovette pure mandare per la penna. Avuto l'occorrente si mise a tavola con una certa importanza, come di chi deve scrivere a lungo, e complicato protocollo, mentre non si trattava che di mettere la data, i nomi dei 4 lavoratori, e quello dei padroni. Fra cercare scrivere e cancellare e tornare a scrivere impiegò un'ora. Poveri paesi! Quanta gente ignorante! E perché? Perché non hanno scuole. O se ve ne sono, sono distanti trenta, 40 o 60 km. Perciò non è da meravigliarsi delle genti, ma di chi le governa; invece di far la guerra, farebbe meglio a fare scuole, e istruire il popolo."

²⁹ Luciana Palla (a cura di), *Scritture di guerra n. 6: Simone Chiocchetti, Vigilio Iellico, Giacomo Somnavilla, Albino Soratroi* (Trento: Museo storico in Trento; Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 1997). Correspondance of Simone Chiocchetti. Original Italian version: "in questo paese è la religione ortodossa, ma vi è poca religione, fanno bensì molti segni della croce, numerai dalla vecia 40 volte di seguito sempre con un inchino davanti a un piccolo quadro del loro fondatore, ma oltre a questo nulla fanno di religione; vi è anche una piccola bellina chiesa ... i miei padroni non li ho mai visti andare, e tutti in paese vanno anche la festa con le slitte."

Refugees from Trentino in Bohemia and Moravia

The notes and writings of the Trentino soldiers in Russia or in Galicia differ substantially from the reflections developed by the refugees from Trentino, who settled in Bohemia and Moravia.³⁰ The difference does not substantially concern the living conditions, which are characterized in all three contexts by economic difficulties, scarcity, and estrangement due to the novelty brought by the war, which involves uprooting and life in a new, unknown environment. The annotations of the refugees are often gendered writings recorded by adolescent or adult women; the distinctive element for this analysis, however, is not given by gender but by the living environment.

We can clearly understand the difference resulting from the impressions obtained by the refugees located in Bohemia in mid-1915 and the records of the soldiers sent to Galicia in mid-1914. The uprooting of refugees from everyday life is evident and brings with it extreme difficulties in coexistence and housing. However, the first impact, although characterized by mistrust and linguistic difficulties, benefits from some elements of sharing common values, which are not to be found in Galicia and even less in Russia. The housing challenge is not easy in a context where the state has difficulty coping with the needs of welfare and assistance. However, there are indications of a community of values, which recalls a sense of common or, at least, shared belonging.³¹ Amelia Vivaldelli's notes, taken in Drahonice, Bohemia, represent a good starting point for the analysis:

“When we got there, we were placed near a good farmer and they sent us to a room and a kitchen. Everyone came to see us, and they brought milk, some bread, potatoes, wood, kitchen utensils, tables, benches, and other things. Everyone wanted to know something about us: they questioned us, but it was impossible to understand their language. Our master also brought us plenty of straw and sheets and blankets, and they made the beds. After lunch, our father found work for the mayor of the village and his brother-in-law. We have found very friendly people, every day they bring us bread and other things. On the 30th we will attend Mass at the church of Skocice, half an hour away. During the Holy Mass, it was not even possible to say a Hail Mary because everyone sang in the Bohemian language. A few days ago, they went to dig beets. We too.”³²

³⁰ See the above-mentioned books of Francesco Frizzera, Paolo Malni, Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra.

³¹ Morelon, “*L’arrivée des réfugiés*”, 5–18 for the refugees settled in Bohemia; about refugee camps, see Doina Anca Cretu, “Child assistance and the making of modern refugee camps in Austria-Hungary during the First World War” *Central European History* (2022): 1–18.

³² Amelia Vivaldelli diary, in Quinto Antonelli et al., (a cura di), *Scritture di guerra n. 5: Antonietta Angela Bonatti Procura, Giorgina Brocchi, Elena Caracristi, Corina Corradi, Melania Moiola, Cecilia Rizzi Pizzini, Virginia Tranquillini, Amelia Vivaldelli, Ines Zanghielli*, (Trento:

While the Trentino POWs in Russia incessantly underline the backwardness of the Russian agricultural and hygienic practices in their diaries, the refugees from Trentino, coming from a relatively backward context, emphasize the development of Bohemian agricultural practices, the productivity of the land, and the work efforts of the local women. All these elements inhibit the use of civilizing prejudices in assessing the actual condition of refugees in Bohemia.

“All men, women, and we refugees too, were employed to pick up potatoes in these large muddy meadows, so we sank in many places like our soldiers in Galicia. There was a lot of work during the time of the harvest; we saw lots of wagons of potatoes and women with baskets who also gave us a lot of potatoes. We calculated that the poorest family had 40 or more quintals of potatoes at home.

[...]

Many large horses work in this countryside. Most of them sleep in the kitchen. The women in the kitchen are mostly without blouses. These Bohemians work a lot, women too. When women go to the countryside, they dress better than us when we go to the holy mass. They work in any profession better than men, they master sawing and plowing with horses, behind wagons.”³³

Likewise, education was an element of distinction between civilized and non-civilized peoples in the vision of the Trentino writers, but in the case of refugees in Bohemia and Moravia, it became a powerful element of linguistic and social integration. There is at first resistance to sending Italian-speaking children to the

Museo storico in Trento; Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 1996). Original Italian version: “Arrivati costì venimmo collocati presso un buon baccano ove ci destinano una camera ed una cucina. La accorsero tutti chi portava latte chi cleba, patate, legna, utensili di cucina tavole panche ed altre cose. . Tutti avevano desiderio di sapere qualche cosa di noi: c’interrogarono ma il suo linguaggio era impossibile capirlo. ... i nostri padroni ci portarono pure abbondante paglia ed avendo delle lenzuola e coperte si fanno i letti. Al dopo pranzo il papa trova lavoro dal capo villa in compagnia del cognato. Si trova gente assai affabile tutti i giorni ci portano clebe e altre cose. Il giorno 30 si va a messa alla parrocchia di Skocice una mezz’ora distante. Durante la Santa messa non si poteva nemmeno dire un Ave Maria, cagione che tutti cantavano in lingua Boema. I giorni addietro andarono a cavar erba alle barbabietole. Noi pure” [...] “Molti grossi cavalli lavorano in queste campagne, per lo più dormono tutti in cucina. Le donne in cucina per lo più sono senza blusa. Questi boemi lavorano molto per lo più anche le donne. Le donne quando vanno in campagna si vestono meglio di noi quando andiamo a messa. Lavorano di qualunque mestiere meglio degli uomini, sanno ben segare, arare coi cavalli, dietro ai carri.”

³³ Antonelli et al., (a cura di), *Scritture di guerra n. 5*. Original Italian version: “Tutti uomini donne e anche noi profughi fummo impiegati a prender su patate, in mezzo a questi grandi quadri paludosi che da tante parti si affondava come i nostri soldati nella Galizia. C’era un forte lavoro come da noi nel tempo della vendemmia non si vedevano che carri di patate e donne con cesti che pure a noi diedero molte patate. Calcolando la più misera famiglia a in sua casa 40 e più quintali di patate.”

Czech or German school. However, the usefulness of education overcame the initial prejudice, prompting the refugees to accept even the paternalistic point of view of the state authorities.

“On January 4th, being tired of threats, I had to hand over my brother Vittorio together with his sister Edvige to the Bohemian school [...]. They started attending school and received clothes for the little ones as well as linen for the whole family.”³⁴

In 1916 and 1917, the settlement of displaced persons in the villages became problematic. Even in small contexts, the state gradually lost legitimacy, showing itself unable to guarantee the subsistence of its fellow citizens after asking them for enormous sacrifices.³⁵ The refugees were well aware of this process: in a letter written in November 1916 in Prerau and intercepted by the censorship, it says:

“Here in our country, there is no one who decides for us. We go to Mayor, and he sends us to the Captain, we go to him, and he sends me to another place [...]. Mayor told me that he does not know how to decide for us and that we have in Vienna those who think about us [i.e., the Hilfskommittee]. And he always tells me that even his people don't have enough food to eat. So, to whom do we belong?”³⁶

Precisely from the industrial districts of Bohemia, where the situation was now showing signs of precariousness, news arrived during the summer of 1917 confirming this trend. According to an intercepted letter, “You no longer receive anything, neither oil, butter, potatoes, nor flour, with a sole bread for 8 days. It is no longer possible to sustain life, and by now many have died of

³⁴ Antonelli et al., (a cura di), *Scritture di guerra n. 5*. Original Italian version: “Il 4 gennaio essendo stanchi di minacce dovetti consegnare alla scuola boema il fratello vittorio assieme alla sorella Edvige [...] incominciato a frequentare la scuola si ricevette vestiti pei piccoli come pure la biancheria per l'intera famiglia.”

³⁵ Francesco Frizzera, “Dai pieni diritti all'esclusione dalla cittadinanza. I profughi di guerra nell'Impero asburgico e negli Stati successori”, in *Sudditi o cittadini? L'evoluzione delle appartenenze imperiali nella Prima guerra mondiale*, eds. Sara Lorenzini and Simone Attilio Bellezza (Roma: Viella, 2018), 43–63; Francesco Frizzera, “Il rimpatrio dei profughi trentini dalle regioni interne dell'Austria-Ungheria. Un processo pluriennale, specchio delle difficoltà economiche di un Impero”, *Studi Trentini. Storia* 94, no. 2 (2015), 413–450.

³⁶ ÖStA, AVA, MdI, All. 19, Zl. 45463/16, *Einsichtbemerkung des Departements für Sanitätsangelegenheiten*, letter stopped by censors, Prerau, November 1916. Original Italian version: “Qua nel nostro paese non ce nessuno che pensa per noi. Andemo dal Podestà, ne manda dal Capitano, andemo da lui mi manda in un altro luogo e così pure che mi mandino via. Il Podestà mi ga dito che lui non sa pensar per noi. Che noi avemo a Vienna quei che pensano per noi [ovvero l'Hilfskomitee]. E lui mi dice sempre che nianche la sua gente non ga da mangiare. ‘Allora noi di chi semo?’”

starvation”.³⁷ While reading through the text, other interesting details emerge: “The municipal leaders deny us our rights, and when we go to get the wages, we refugees must always be the last ones, otherwise the Bohemians will lash out at us with all possible insults”.³⁸ The obvious contrast between guests and hosts stands out, leading to growing tensions with the local authorities who prefer to protect their citizens. The assistance mechanism gets stuck, and national conflict emerges little by little. The identity boundaries become slowly rigid: “Never a good soul from our Trentino was with us to console us; here, we are like slaves, always disheartened, derided, despised”.³⁹

The same polarizing dynamic of linguistic and spatial identity is found in the diary of Amelia Vivaldelli, who until 1916 had mentioned Italy only in invectives related to the causes of displacement. In a diary, she notes, “In the company of Ida and three other Italians, precisely inhabitants of the village of Campi, we set out to work together with 15–20 Bohemians”; a few pages later, she reports, “It was fun along the journey singing beautiful songs in Italian”. This renewed attention to the linguistic aspect and the contact with other evacuees from Trentino has a spatial consequence: at the beginning of 1917, Tyrol is mentioned for the last time in her diary (“having the grace to return to our dear Tyrol”), which in subsequent annotations is replaced with Trentino (“These days were very dumb, we did not see newspapers or letters, or any news from our beloved Trentino.”).⁴⁰

This progressive stiffening of the relationship with each other, with the consequent definition of group boundaries, is characterized by the appearance of linguistic categorizations for defensive purposes. This can be seen in the diary of Giuseppina Filippi Manfredi, who reported in late 1916 how she entered a Bohemian shop: “The mistress, God bless her! She raises her voice and says, ‘No more bread for the Italians’”; a few lines later: “a Bohemian raises her voice, it sounds like a beast, and says, ‘We will not let the Italians have coal’”.⁴¹

³⁷ ÖStA, AVA, MdI, All. 19, ZL. 50467/17, *Flüchtlinge im Bezirke Aussig: Beschwerde über Approvisionnement und über gehässiges Verhalten der Bevölkerung*, 6 agosto 1917. Original Italian version: “[...] Non si riceve più nulla, né oglio, né burro, né patate né farina, con un puro pane 8 giorni. Non è più possibile tirare invanti la vita e ormai molti sono morti d’inedia.”

³⁸ ÖStA, AVA, MdI, All. 19, ZL. 50467/17. Original Italian version: “I capocomune ci negano i nostri diritti e quando si va a prendere le mercedi noi profughi dobbiamo sempre essere gli ultimi altrimenti i Boemi si scagliano contro di noi con tutte le ingiurie possibili.”

³⁹ ÖStA, AVA, MdI, All. 19, ZL. 50467/17. Original Italian version: “[...] Mai un animo buono dal Nostro Trentino fu da noi per consolarci – mentre – qua siamo come gli schiavi [...] sempre avviliti, derisi, disprezzati, [...]”.

⁴⁰ Amelia Vivaldelli diary, in Antonelli et al., (a cura di), *Scritture di guerra n. 5*.

⁴¹ Giuseppina Filippi Manfredi diary, Quinto Antonelli et al., *Scritture di guerra n. 4: Valeria Bais, Amabile Maria Broz, Giuseppina Cattoi, Giuseppina Filippi Manfredi, Adelia Parisi Bruseghini, Luigia Senter Dalbosco* (Trento: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino; Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra 1996).

In general terms, it seems that for refugees, the concepts of civilization, sharing a set of values linked to school education or religion, and even belonging to an Empire that had shaped its citizens according to the principles of progress and positivist modernization⁴² were not deeply affected by the worsening of interpersonal relationships between the local population and temporary guests due to the economic difficulties of the Empire. Rather, the elements of distinction are identified based on national or linguistic fractures, independently of the aspects listed above, which instead are obsessively present in the notes written by soldiers sent to Galicia or Russia. From this point of view, we can see noticeable differences between the writings of refugees and diaries written by soldiers, regardless of whether the latter are combatants or not or whether they are sent beyond the Empire's borders.

Final considerations

For the citizens of Trentino, uprooted by the war and faced with the prospect of having to deal permanently with the population of Central and Eastern Europe in a non-ordinary context, there is evidence that the contact with Galicia and Russia was more traumatic than the experience of displacement to Bohemia and Moravia. This happened despite the fact that in the first case this contact was mediated by the organizing element of the army, which allowed the state to be present through one of its most organized and ordering apparatuses. Religious prejudices, the severity of Catholic education, anti-semitic culture, and civilizing prejudice are constant elements of evaluation, exploited according to moralistic criteria, with the aim of weighing the surrounding reality by measuring the degree of civilization.

In some ways, this is a surprising element because the Trentino region was actually economically weak, and the residing population was practicing seasonal and temporary emigration due to poverty. Nonetheless, Eastern Europe represents a culture shock for the soldiers from Trentino. In addition, interestingly, Galicia, which was part of the Empire and belonged to its Austrian half, was perceived as something "very different" from the average standard of civilization shared by the *Tyrolean Kaiserjäger* sent there to defend the state border. There are potentially more differences between Bohemia and Galicia than between Galicia and Russia, in the opinion of some writers from Trentino. These findings are subjective, and they cannot be taken as general characteristics, but are in any case indicative of a widespread perception among many writers.

⁴² Cole and Unowsky, eds., *The Limits of Loyalty*; Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016); Marco Bellabarba, *L'impero asburgico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

The surveys from Bohemia and Moravia are less traumatic. They are also less static. Diaries describe a lacerating experience, which reveals elements of inclusion and mutual respect, also based on religious community or socially accepted customs and traditions, including agricultural ones, at least as long as the economic conditions in the Empire make coexistence sustainable. Cohabitation breaks down, also acquiring a national connotation, when guests become economic competitors. The linguistic difference and the difference in the degree of economic development were not necessarily an element of estrangement in 1915, even though they caused some difficulties. It is challenging to say if the different gender relations – and if the different ways of cohabitation – had a substantial impact in these evaluations. Certainly, a group was resettled into another reality, which is described through the filter of prejudices at first glance.

The main issue is to understand if the conflict acts as an acceleration factor for a complex system of belonging, which cannot be declined only on linguistic or national bases. Regionalism is not an easy answer to this question, which arises only for some writers. However, we can imagine that the dynamics described above strengthen the boundaries between “us” and “the others” defining them more clearly even if regional identity is a kind of spatial identity on a certain scale that foresees a degree of abstraction from the concrete space of reference.

Here, if we take theoretical elaborations about regional identity for granted,⁴³ we realize how the outbreak of the war accelerated an ongoing process, the institutionalization of which envisaged long-lasting outputs, resulting in polarization and, maybe, in a different group representation.

⁴³ J. Pohl, “Regional Identity”, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001); Anssi Paasi, “Region and place: regional identity in question”, *Progress in Human Geography* 27, no. 4 (2003), 475–485.

