

The First World War

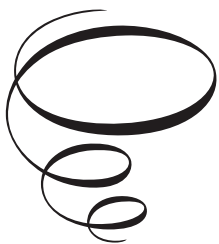
The First World War:

Analysis and Interpretation, Volume 1

Edited by

Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta

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FROM TITAN AGAINST THE TITANS: THE REPUBLIC OF SAN MARINO AND THE GREAT WAR

ANTONELLO BATTAGLIA

On May 24, 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary. After nearly a year of neutrality, the kingdom of Vittorio Emanuele III ended the hesitation and—with the secret Treaty of London signed the previous month—entered the war on the side of the Entente.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the government in Rome had strong suspicions about the *Serenissima Repubblica di San Marino* (the Most Serene Republic of San Marino) and feared that it would give asylum to deserters and recalcitrants who avoided the call to arms. For this reason, weeks prior to the Italian entry into the war, the Italian government implemented a tight control over the communication lines of San Marino and over the postal censorship. But in the republic, except the Socialist Party, all political forces were in favor of interventionism on the side of Rome against the Habsburg troops: one of the motivations of the interventionists of San Marino was the “redemption” of the island of Rab, the country of origin of Marino, a stonemason, who retired to Monte Titano and founded San Marino in 301 AD.

The San Marino authorities protested against considerable delays in postal correspondence, but the government in Rome interrupted telephone communications as well. During the same week, professor Borbiconi, a teacher of physics at a high school in the republic, constructed, for study purposes, a small radio station connected to an antenna consisting of a copper cable attached to two towers. The news spread quickly; the Italian authorities protested and strong accusations of espionage were raised in Vienna and Berlin. In fact, according to the Austro-Germans, the radio was used to capture the messages of the Austro-Hungarian fleet and to transmit them to the French intelligence (Giardi 2011, 10–20).

Many delegations of the republic requested and were heard at the military authorities of Bologna, but despite vehement demands, the reactivation of the service was not granted. Despite the reassurances from

the republic, the Italian authorities—out of the fear that deserters could take refuge in the republic—tried in vain to obtain an allocation for a police station in the municipality of Serravalle. Although San Marino was neutral and had every right to grant asylum to anyone who requested it, Italy believed that the norm of friendship and good neighborliness prevailed over the rules of international law. Another issue was related to naturalization granted by San Marino to men of military service age. Italy was opposed to this legal practice and did not recognize the validity of naturalization, claiming, therefore, the recruitment of young aspirants to San Marino citizenship.

There was the case of a Habsburg soldier who had escaped from a concentration camp in Caserta and took refuge in the neutral Republic of San Marino in search of asylum. San Marino's authorities informed the Italian consulate, and on the order of the latter, he was arrested and extradited to Italy. To adapt to the pressing Italian requests, San Marino adopted a set of measures such as the one that prohibited access to the borders of Monte Titano and making fire during night to avoid any possibility of signals being sent by spies and fugitives.

Geographically, San Marino was not far from the area of conflict. The Adriatic Sea had been a very active scenario of war since the summer of 1914. The Anglo-French fleet—made up of units *Courbet*, *Jean Bart*, the cruiser *Julien de la Graviere*, two heavy cruisers, two squadrons of pre-dreadnought battleships and eight squadrons of destroyers for support—tried to impose a naval blockade on Montenegro. On August 16, 1914, not far from the city of Bar, the Austrian light cruiser *Zenta* was sunk. During the whole summer, the Habsburg fleet launched naval bombardments on the Serbian and Montenegrin coasts. In November, the French units attempted, several times, to raid the Austro-Hungarian base of Pula. The French submarine *Curie* attacked the protective blockade of the bay but was trapped by anti-submarine nets; it was forced to surface and was destroyed by the enemy destroyers *SMS Magnet* and *Tb 63T*. On December 21—near Sazan Island—the *U-12* of the Habsburg navy torpedoed the battleship *Jean Bart*, forcing it to leave the Adriatic Sea to shelter in Malta. After the Italian declaration of war, the Austro-Hungarian fleet reacted very quickly, attacking the coast of Marche—particularly the port of Ancona (on May 23, the destroyer *Dinara* and torpedo *Tb 53T*; on May 24, battleships *Viribus Unitis*, *Tegetthoff*, *Prinz Eugen* and eight pre-dreadnoughts), Rimini, and Vieste (destroyer *Lika*). Among other places that were bombarded were: Potenza Picena (pre-dreadnought *Radetzky* and two torpedoes), Senigallia (*Zrinyi* battleship and two torpedo boats), the island of Cretaccio (cruiser *Amiral Spaun*), Torre Mileto (destroyer

Streiter), Barletta (cruiser *Helgoland* sank the Italian destroyer *Turbine*), Manfredonia (destroyers *Tatra* and *Csepel*), and Venice (seaplane).

The war was very close to San Marino and, just like in Italy, the interventionist propaganda was particularly active. During the same period, with the aim of supporting the irredentist cause, the Comitato Pro Fratelli Italiani Combattenti (Committee Pro Fighters Brothers) was established, directed by Onofrio Fattori. In June, ten days after the Italian declaration of war, the committee published a proclamation calling on volunteers to go to the front to support the Italian Royal Army. San Marino was officially neutral, but Vienna considered the widespread irredentism, the proclamation and the absence of government actions to suppress the voluntary movement as clear signals of San Marino's connivance with the Italian anti-Austrian policy and the republic's involvement, even if not direct, in the Great War. False news of San Marino's declaration of war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire spread. However, the republic did not officially deny these rumors and the relations with Vienna were further worsening until the diplomatic ones were not suspended. Due to the increasing enrollment of volunteers, which was very considerable considering the republic's population, Austria-Hungary did not recognize the neutrality of the Republic of San Marino and considered it a belligerent country. The Austro-Hungarian authorities detained all San Marino's citizens on the empire's territory: women and children were expelled to Italy and all adult males were interned in the concentration camp of Katzenau, near Linz. The government of the republic appealed in vain to the United States and the Vatican for help. However, the diplomatic mediation failed and Vienna would not release the prisoners until the end of the war. Many volunteers joined the call to arms, among them Carlo Simoncini and Sady Serafini; both died during the fighting at the Karst, the first on July 16 and the second on October 12.¹ The first victims from San Marino became heroes of the republic; their corpses were brought back to the homeland only on October 5, 1924, and were placed in two monumental coffins made of stone from the mountain in the cemetery of Montalbo.² The families of the volunteers and detainees interned in

¹ The medal to Carlo Simoncini, decreed by the Senato consulto, on August 8, 1916, reads: "Carlo Simoncini, sammarinese caporale Volontario del III. Regg. Artiglieria da Campagna caduto da Prode su l'ultima vigiglia di Gorizia Italiana [sic]." The medal to Sady Serafini, decreed on October 19, 1916: "Sady Serafini, sammarinese caporale Volontario del I. Regg. Artiglieria da Montagna, Gloriosamente Caduto sul Carso."

² *Ara dei Volontari*, dedicated to 140 volunteers who had died for the "wars of Italy" since 1843, was inaugurated in 1927.

Austro-Hungarian camps received support and subsidies during the whole conflict and the committee strived to find additional funds, even outside the territory of the republic. The sale of postage stamps, for example, brought 40,000 lire. The women's section of the committee, divided into three subcommittees, Città, Borgo, and Serravalle, also emerged. These organizations were particularly active in the production and collection of goods, which were needed at the front, such as blankets, vests, sweaters, socks, gloves, balaclavas, and nightgowns for injured people. In subsequent years, the sub-committees also specialized in the production of anti-gas masks: around 270 pieces were sent to the front.

In addition to the recruitment of volunteers and the support of their families, the Committee Pro Fratelli Italiani Combattenti was also active in the construction of a field hospital at the front line thanks to the initiative of doctor Amedeo Kraus, an Italian Red Cross volunteer. The doctor of San Marino, who had already done many surgeries, proposed to the citizens' committee and to the government of the republic to prepare a hospital near Trieste, where the coat of arms of San Marino on the façade of the consulate had been violated and burned by the Austro-Hungarian troops, as revenge against the volunteers. On August 27, 1916, the delegation of the Red Cross was inaugurated. San Marino's public opinion, moved by the death of the volunteers Simoncini and Seranini, supported the initiative of Kraus. It was welcomed with ovation and was accepted at the session of September 18, 1916. The staff was composed of San Marino's doctors and nurses under the supervision of Professor Girolamo Gatti. Doctor Kraus made a loyalty oath, followed by all the members:

I swear to be faithful to the Homeland, to put all my activities and care in the performance of my duty, to accept Italian laws during my military service for the common good of the Great Mother Italy.³

Each officer received a paper with acknowledgement—signed by the secretary of state of the republic and by the chairman of the committee—together with the republic's coat of arms for the uniforms.

As it has already been mentioned, the direction of the hospital was entrusted to director Girolamo Gatti, while other officers were: Medical Captain Egidio Tonnini, Medical Lieutenant Naldo Galassi, Chaplain Lieutenant Giuseppe Guidi, and Pharmacist Lieutenant Giovanni Vincenti.

³ “Giuro di mantenermi fedele alla Patria, di porre ogni mia attività e cura nell'adempimento del mio dovere, di accettare le leggi italiane durante il mio servizio militare per il bene comune della Grande Madre Italia” (In Olei 2012–13).

The small republic, therefore, was mobilized. All the requirements were prepared and a detailed list of voluntary members was also made. Accepting the request for medical aid by Italy, the volunteers went to the front and established the first hospital—of seventeen thousand lire—at San Lorenzo Fiumicello (Gorizia).

The structure, made of wood and concrete, had a number of units: pharmacy, bathroom, radiography, dressing-room, a well for drinking water, a garage, twenty warehouses, sections for injured officers and operating rooms. As a health care facility at the front, the hospital provided first aid to the wounded. For all other interventions, patients were directed to hospitals behind the front lines. Initially, there were fifty beds, but in a short period of time the number increased to one hundred and twenty. The hospital received more than three thousand wounded, among which some were from the enemy's army, who, due to the standards of medical ethics, had to be rescued. Most interventions regarded wounds and amputations, but there were also treatments of diseases that were common in the trenches such as pneumonia, malaria, scabies, cholera, dysentery, typhus, and the first cases of an illness that came to be known as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), a neurological disorder that develops due to the stress and shock suffered during bombardments.

The director, Gatti, wrote to Onofri:

... The fervor of the work of all the good Officers of the hospital of San Marino is made more pleasant and fertile by a friendly harmony, by a fraternity of sentiments, which, not taking anything from the discipline, multiply the energy and the results. With these men the job is easy and pleasant.

Yesterday, there were many injured people in the hospital.

I wanted to write this to you, President of the Committee of San Marino, and I would like that all the people of San Marino hear me and be rightly proud of the work of their co-citizens, who have already been able to attract a lot of sympathy to the Republic and to give a tangible contribution...⁴

⁴ "... Il fervore di opere di tutti i bravi Ufficiali dell'Ospedale sammarinese è reso più simpatico e fecondo da un'armonia cordiale, da una fraternità di sentimenti che, mentre nulla toglie alla disciplina, moltiplica energie e risultati. Con uomini cosiffatti l'attività è facile e gradevole.

Ieri grande affluenza di feriti in Ospedale.

Questo ho voluto scrivere a lei Presidente dei Comitato sammarinese e vorrei che tutti i sammarinesi mi sentissero onde fossero giustamente orgogliosi dell'opera dei loro concittadini che hanno già saputo cattivare tanta simpatia alla Repubblica e dare già tangibile contributo..." Cited in "Museum Bollettino della Biblioteca," Museo ed Archivio governativi dello Studio Sammarinese, Anno II nn. 2,3.

In the morning of October 27, 1917—three days after the Battle of Caporetto when the northern sector of the Isonzo fell—Kraus received an order to begin to prepare the staff and patients for a possible retreat. The superfluous materials were sent to the military warehouses of Cervignano and Torre Zuino, while all the empty beds and the rest of the medical supplies that were not essential at that moment were packed for evacuation.

A phonogram received at 2 p.m. ordered the evacuation of all the patients from the hospital, the immediate abandonment of the locality and the imminent arrival of two wagons, pulled by mules, sent to load the materials. The staff transferred the patients to ambulance cars and took care of medical supplies. Without other means of transport, Kraus arranged one light two-wheeled cart, a Sicilian cart and four large carts on four wheels pulled by oxen and horses. At 6.45 p.m., the first carts departed from Borgo San Lorenzo of Fiumicello, near Aquileia, under the command of Captain Tonnini. Kraus and doctors Galassi and Naldo, and four soldiers remained to wait two carts that were promised by the military authorities. But, due to the delay, the professor searched and arranged a large vehicle pulled by oxen on which he loaded the remaining materials.

At 9 p.m. this latter part of the convoy parted, abandoning the positions that one week before were occupied by the Italian outposts. Kraus, after feeding the animals that pulled the carts, started moving towards Torre Zuino, where Tonnini and his caravan, which left a few hours before, were waiting. Rain and mud hampered the march, therefore, in Cervignano, at midnight, he decided to leave the convoy to the command of doctor Galassi and go by foot to Torre Zuino to alert Tonnini about the delay of the rest of the convoy. When he reached the destination, the professor did not find Tonnini. Due to the intensity of the rain, Captain Tonnini had preferred to go back on the road to San Giorgio Nogaro and find shelter from the storm. Kraus, however, continued his journey to that place, where he found the convoy and alerted Tonnini that he needed to wait for the last part of the caravan that was late due to the storm and encountered numerous difficulties. In fact, a wagon had overturned in a ditch along the road, another broke, and oxen did not want to tow the third wagon that was left on the road and was watched by a soldier. Doctor Galassi preferred to continue on foot and to reach Kraus and Tonnini in San Giorgio Nogaro to invite them to continue their journey without waiting for the last unfortunate convoy. Considering that it was necessary to speed up the retreat, Kraus decided to unload some materials to lighten the carts and give it to the Italian Red Cross. The caravan, consisting of four carts, continued the march under the pouring rain. Sergeant Mosè was appointed

to lead the carts to their destination, while Kraus and the other officers continued by train to Latisana, where they arrived after twelve hours, and then to Portogruaro at 11 p.m., on October 29, 1917.

On November 1, Kraus reached S. Dona di Piave, where he met professor Gatti, who announced to him the imminent dissolution of the field hospital of San Marino. Out of the eight carts that had departed from Borgo San Lorenzo, only three arrived safely, therefore Gatti preferred to send the remaining materials to other hospitals and dismember the health center.

The officers of San Marino's hospital did not accept this decision and appealed to the General Health Direction of the III Army and to its delegate from the Red Cross to revoke the measure. In Kraus' opinion the lost supplies could be recovered in a short period of time.

On the other hand, also the Comitato Pro Fratelli Italiani Combattenti was looking for new funds for the reconstruction of the hospital.

The communication already received from the republic affirms the aim to put at the disposal financial means for a fast reconstruction of the Hospital. All the staff of the hospital is eager about this reconstruction, more close and unanimous after the recent painful trial Now taking into account: 1) that for all the staff their disintegration would be painful and that the morale factor is a great motivation of action; 2) that once apart and scattered in various units, it would be difficult to reunite them without disturbing the units to which they would be assigned; 3) that the reconstruction period would be very short, given the means and the firm intention of all, it is requested:

I ° That the staff of the Hospital of the Republic of San Marino is possibly still kept at a disposal until the reconstruction of the Hospital itself, to be done within a short period of time. ..

II That, whatever extreme necessities would demand the use of the staff of the said hospital also before its reconstruction, the very staff should remain united and together in that hospital function..., in the way that it could be more easily united back again at the "Hospital of San Marino," as soon as it is built.⁵

⁵ "Comunicazioni già pervenute dalla Repubblica affermano il proposito di mettere a disposizione i mezzi finanziari per la pronta ricostruzione dell'Ospedale. Tutto il personale dell'Ospedale è ansioso di tale ricostruzione, più che mai affiatato e compatto dopo la recente dolorosa prova Ora tenuto conto: 1). che sarebbe doloroso per tutto il personale il disgregamento di esso e che il fattore morale è una gran molla di azione ; 2). che una volta disgregato e sparso in varie Unità sarebbe difficile riunirlo senza perturbare le varie Unità a cui fosse assegnato; 3). che il periodo di ricostruzione sarà brevissimo, dati i mezzi ed il fermo proposito di tutti, si domanda :

The appeal produced the desired effect and, thanks to the proceeds of San Marino, the hospital was rebuilt in March 1918 at Treviso with certain relocations due to war activities, until its final destination, at Aiudussina near Postumia. On June 15, the hospital was attacked by some enemy artillery batteries. A large-caliber projectile (381 mm) fell near the hospital and the roof of the building was destroyed. Another bullet hit the hospital, destroying one sector and damaging the stability of the building. In addition to structural damages, the bombing killed a horse, while Sergeant Dei and the driver of the ambulance, Campanili, were injured. A cart was irreparably damaged and the ambulance car was hit by debris that damaged one part. The vehicle, however, continued evacuating the patients and in a short time, despite the enemies' tear gas, all the patients were saved and brought to other hospitals. During the evacuation, the following members were distinguished: Marshal Scartabelli, corporals Masini, Tosi and Ferraretti, the soldiers Russo, Begali, Fantozzi, Pallini, Tenzoni, Oddenino, Alessio, Dacci Lucangelo, and Genga.

The lost position was regained in the following days and, after a quick reconstruction, the building where the hospital was placed was restored quickly. However, the structural damage proved to be more serious than was expected, and the hospital was moved again. In total there were six changes of position between Monfalcone, Treviso, Mestre, and Gorizia.⁶

On July 8, nineteen-year-old Ernest Hemingway, then a driver of the ambulance for the American Red Cross, was urgently admitted to the hospital. Along the banks of the Piave, at Fossalta, the famous American writer was injured by an enemy mortar. During the attack an Italian soldier died and another was seriously wounded. Hemingway was able to carry on

I° Che il personale dell'Ospedale della Repubblica di San Marino sia possibilmente mantenuto fermo a disposizione fino alla ricostruzione dell'Ospedale stesso, da farsi entro breve periodo di tempo.

II° Che, qualora esigenze assolute richiedessero l'utilizzazione del personale di detto ospedale anche prima della sua ricostruzione, il personale stesso sia mantenuto unito e aggregato in massa a quel funzionamento ospitaliero che si crederà del caso, in modo da poterlo più facilmente aggregare di nuovo tutto all'Ospedale di San Marino appena ricostruito. Kraus to Gatti cit. from "Museum Bollettino della Biblioteca," Museo ed Archivio governativi dello Studio Sammarinese Anno II nn. 2,3.

⁶ San Lorenzo Fiumicello, elementary school, from April 15 to October 27, 1917; Melma, near Treviso, Villa Varetton from March 6 to June 15, 1918, and from June 25 to August 10, 1918; Preganziol, field hospital number 146, from June 16 to 24 1918; Marocco, Villa Volpi, from August 11 to October 12, 1918; Casier sul Sile, Villa Toso, from October 13 to November 2, 1918; Aidussina, former Austrian hospital number 1308, from November 23 to December 24, 1918.

his shoulders the soldier who was still alive and despite being hit again—this time on the knee—by an enemy machine gun—he reached the field hospital of San Marino, where he received first aid.

The future Nobel Prize winner for literature was later hospitalized in an American hospital in Armorari Street in Milan, where he remained three months and collected many stories about the battle of Caporetto that inspired him to write *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).

After the armistice, on November 30, 1918, the flag on the hospital was handed over to the mayor of Trieste. It was the end of the war. In the following weeks, the health personnel and volunteers came back to their homeland, together with numerous refugees and deserters. For this reason, the government of the Republic of San Marino was forced to ask Italy for a police garrison. The experience of San Marino in the Great War came to its end.

The republic had not participated in military actions from the Middle Ages and was officially neutral throughout the First World War, but in reality, it was not indifferent to the events that happened in its immediate vicinity. The volunteers of this small nation, which counted barely thirty thousand inhabitants, selflessly helped the military efforts of the neighboring Italy and the San Marino Red Cross offered an important health service, which was recognized by all the institutions for its efficiency.

Probably the intervention of the Serenissima was not decisive for the final outcome of the war but the republic of Titano—even if with its small proportions—gave an effective contribution to the victory over the Central powers, the Titans.

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