"World War One" in Italy

There are many reasons why the First World War has been referred to, both by historians and by others, as "the Great War". The word "great" can be given various interpretations: from the extent of the areas in the world that were involved in the conflict to the heavy damage that was caused by this war.

But the word "great" can also easily refer to one of the most tragic aspects of this event, namely the number of deaths that it caused. According to more reliable statistical data, it is estimated that in the whole of Europe the number of deaths that were directly connected to the fighting that took place stood at around ten million. This is a huge number that had ever occurred before and that even now ranks second only to the Second World.

After almost a century since it started, the First World War still occupies a very important place in the collective memory of mankind.

One of the reasons why the First World War is still considered so fascinating and emotional is the existence of innumerable traces and monuments linked to this event on the land where the war was fought and lived. The military exigencies of this period, in fact, led to a deep transformation of the countryside that has survived up to the present time.
This extensive range of evidence, often located in marvellous natural settings, today constitutes an important sign of the memory that is able to teach and to raise emotions. Inside the fortifications can be seen with one's eyes and touched with one's hands the places where millions of men fought and where numerous pages of our history have been written.

The Great War was an exceptional and all-encompassing event. The number of men and boys of enlistment age was slightly less than six million and considering that at that time there were slightly more than seven and a half million Italian families.

When World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, Italy declared itself neutral in the conflict, despite its membership in the so-called Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary since 1882.

On May 23, 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary
In late October 1917, German intervention to help Austria-Hungary resulted in a spectacular victory over the Italians in the Battle of Caporetto. 1918 marked the end of the war and, for Italy, it was the year of two of the most relevant World War One battles, that of the River Piave and that of Vittorio Veneto.
Life in Italy during the Great War

What was life like inside the trenches when the guns were silent? What were the living conditions of the civilian population in areas behind the frontlines and in the rest of Italy?

Very often research and history books have given prominence to the leading events of the First World War, to heroic acts and to the achievements of individuals who later became symbols of patriotism. In contrast, the daily life of people and soldiers has been overlooked or considered as a matter for specialists.

The First World War should not in fact be limited to military or political issues or to technological and military innovations. Besides taking part in combat, soldiers had to live in trenches and to withstand all the problems that can be easily imagined. These were situations of hardship and suffering that also affected women, youths, elderly persons and children from all over Italy.

But beyond this emotional aspect, the civilian population can be considered in all respects as another protagonist of the Great War.

Those who were mostly affected were obviously those who lived in areas behind the war front, in those stretches of the territory that were near the military front that for logistical purposes were heavily militarized. But residents and families in the rest of the country too should not be forgotten since they were located within the so called "home front" and gave a strong contribution to the social and cultural upheavals of this period.
In towns and villages behind the war zones, residents had to live side by side throughout the war with the constant presence of military personnel. On a practical level, this aspect of the First World War undoubtedly represented a problem for these civilians; the military machine was certainly cumbersome and soldiers were sometimes involved in excesses and violent behaviour. Stress, nervousness and despair would often push them to "let off steam" when they got back to a more or less normal life. The addiction of many of them to alcohol would often lead to squabbles, violence and to explicit attention to the girls of these localities. These episodes grew strongly in number and became increasingly serious in localities that a few months earlier belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire so the civilian population and the military personnel did not trust each other.
The Austro-Hungarian propaganda in the spring of 1915 had highlighted the poor character of Italians who were portrayed as traitors who could resort to any kind of malice. The Italian side on the other hand would warn its soldiers (as well as officers) always to keep their eyes wide open: anybody could in fact be a spy or a double agent. This confusion also increased because of the language used to communicate with each other was the local dialect.

In the midst all this continuous violence, however, there were also some instances of peaceful coexistence between the civilian population and military personnel. At the same time others, the military personnel who were constantly engaged in areas away from the war front established daily contacts with the residents of these places and there were also instances of engagements and even marriages with local girls.

The aim of the authorities was to promote the participation in the war effort of the whole Italian population without exception, including women and children.

After 1915 it was in fact necessary to support the war both economically and ideologically and to prevent a resigned feeling of defeat and pacifist positions from spreading. Customs, work, social relationships and culture changed significantly compared to the pre-war period with the birth of the home front. A case in point was the Industrial Mobilization, an organization that was promoted to control industrial production for the war effort and recruit manpower.
As a result of this initiative, women appeared for the first time in metal working and mechanical factories in view of the absence of hundreds of thousands of male workers. Changes took place not only in the tasks and habits of women and youths but also in those of children. Like everybody else, they too had to get used to the concepts of the Motherland, war and sacrifice.

Women in the Great War
The absence of many men who were called to arms brought about very serious economic and social consequences. In most families the male members had the task of working outside the home while women performed their duties inside the households, taking care of children and seeing to the daily chores. This situation changed considerably in 1915. The places of work of many peasants and workers that were left empty by those who would never be called to the warfront: women. This was a very important moment for the social history of the country. The role of women, for the first time, moved from that of "an angel of the domestic hearth" to an active member of the economy and of collective society.

Women were not completely new to this type of experience: many of them were already used to contribute to work on farms while, at the industrial level, they had already participated in the textile sector. But now their number increased considerably and they participated in sectors that were completely new such as the steel industry (that was adapted to meet military demand), machinery and transport and work of an administrative nature.
Obviously this process was not without pain: since no division of labour had been envisaged, women were obliged to carry out the same work as their male colleagues, even the heavier duties. On farms it was necessary to move haystacks or sacks of grain, look after the livestock and use all the heavy agricultural machinery. In the same way heavy weights had to be carried inside factories and certain actions and movements had to be repeated over and over again in a mechanical manner.

Women took the place of their husbands (or sons) even in household chores that are typically associated with men such as bureaucratic issues, the purchase and sale of agricultural products and legal problems. This sort of "emancipation" at the workplace was not, however, accompanied by greater personal freedom: and in the absence of working-age men, quite often it was elderly persons who remained inside households and who, in line with tradition, continued to exercise their authoritarian role within the family. Besides, an attitude of mistrust as well as a rejection of this situation was noticeable among moralists and traditionalists.
This way of thinking worsened as time went by when younger girls increasingly left home in search of work.

One aspect that involved **women during the Great War** concerned welfare attitudes, both from a Catholic as well as from a lay perspective. Many women organized centres for meetings for the promotion of initiatives to support the war such as the collection of money or goods that were meant for the families of soldiers who were deployed on the front or else organized visits to soldiers who were on leave or **away from the battlefields**. Women **from the middle class and from aristocratic families** with good financial means were particularly involved in these initiatives. They maintained their roles on lines that were more traditional and dignified. By applying their skills and their knowledge of home economics, they would gather in groups and were also able to make garments that could serve against pests and prevented the problem of head lice inside trenches or else they organized the collection of kernels of peaches and apricots which were processed properly and transformed into soap.
At the same time that these "maternal" initiatives were under way, similar initiatives in the medical field too were launched with the mobilization of volunteer women and girls of the Red Cross Hospitals that were located in areas that were away from the frontline and other similar institutions had lots of nurses who were eager to provide help and relief to wounded soldiers and to those who came back from terrible periods spent in the trenches. It is estimated that in 1917 there were about 10,000 Red Cross volunteers.

Their appearance was undoubtedly more prominent when compared to that of other Italian women during the First World War. Being in attendance in areas away from the battlefields in environments that were characterized by a very strong male presence and with the aim of nursing these men by means of physical contact, these nurses became a symbol of womanhood that was blended with eroticism.

This image was also used in propaganda: "There are many postcards where these nurses, elegantly clothed in their uniforms and not without an element of flirting, peep in the direction of stalwart soldiers, embrace them and assume openly seductive attitudes." On the other hand the relationship between love and war also appears in many contemporary songs that were sung by soldiers or in novels such as the very famous "Farewell to Arms" by Hemingway.
Primary education during the Great War
During the Great War even schools were transformed into machines for patriotic support. Among the changes that were made, there were particular school subjects which after a careful review, proposed educational programmes that were related to the theme of conflict and discussions linked to current events. The aim was to make school children understand the meaning of such terms as the Homeland, the war for Trento and Trieste and military heroism and to make them familiar even with the most tragic aspects of war such as daily violence and death.
During Italian lessons teachers would themselves read, and would make their students read, newspaper articles about the war and about what was happening on the warfront. Great importance was given to descriptions of the many illustrations that were published in these newspapers, with the first among them being the most famous ones on the "La Domenica del Corriere".
History lessons on the other hand provided detailed insights into the wars of independence, the birth of the Kingdom of Italy and a whole series of "patriotic" lectures.

In 1917 the story of Pinocchio, the well-known wooden puppet who was invented by Carlo Collodi in 1881, was revisited and became somewhat famous. Collodi's grandson wrote "Il cuore di Pinocchio. Nuove avventure del celebre burattino"
At the centre of this narrative there was no longer the nose of Pinocchio that grew longer with each lie that he said but the wooden legs and the arms that recalled metaphorically the amputations to soldiers who were wounded during the war.

The topography of the Carso, the territories and the places along the frontline, the names of the towns that were conquered since the start of the war and the logistical problems that the army had to face were all included in the geography syllabus while in the science curriculum great prominence was given to technological innovations in the military field. As a result children learnt about weapons that were used at the front, explosives and the cruelty of poison gas and about the fascinating airplanes. There were also references to techniques used for the construction of trenches, excavations and barbed wire fences and the organization of zones that were away from the frontlines. Finally teachers of physical education were advised to replace the hours allocated to gymnastics and sport with visits to military hospitals, to factories that had been adapted for military production and to prisoner-of-war camps. Teachers were also obliged to monitor and to report cases of children who showed little inclination to back the war and to support patriotic efforts. Nothing must disturb the growing patriotism of children.
Children’s games during the Great War
Up to the end of the 19th century, children were given little consideration within society and in the emerging mass market. On the contrary, at the start of the 20th century children started being considered as potential readers and consumers of goods.

This gave rise to the birth of the first children’s comics and mass production began of the first toys which were a huge success. It was therefore somewhat easy, in 1915, to give a patriotic dimension to these two innovations so as to involve even the youngest section of the population to participate in the First World War.

The "Corriere dei Piccoli" was the most popular children’s newspaper in Italian history.
Various pictures showed children intent on sleeping in their small bed while dreaming of participating in heroic actions on the front or else hugging their toy soldiers.

Another example is that of postcards with an invitation to follow the example of children who appeared on these cards. As good young Italian citizens they did not play with skipping ropes so as not to wear too much the soles of their shoes or else they tried not to stain their sheets with their pen in order to avoid waste. These postcards also urged them not to eat anything between meals and not to use sugar since this commodity was scarce throughout all the years of the war.

Even toys and group games changed in 1915. In the shops it was no longer possible to find teddy bears but instead there were imitations of mortars, large siege guns and rifles.
The First World War had indeed involved everyone.
CINEMA

The collective organization of the Italian nation on the idea of war and the participation of the whole nation in the conflict was implemented in various forms. Everywhere on newspapers and on walls in cities huge posters stood out inviting citizens to financially support the Italian war effort. A very large number of advertisements, such as those for very popular alcoholic drinks and toys for children, did not hesitate to exploit the images of soldiers who were deployed on the front. Another way was to make use of the rising wonder of the cinema. In fact unlike print, the pictures that were projected on a screen had a meaning that was simple and at the same time immediate. Everyone was able to go to the cinema: prices were very low and there was no need for a certain type of clothes or to respect the rules of etiquette.
It was in this way that the flourishing Italian film industry understood that the war was a perfect subject for new films. At the same time, supporters of the war realized that the projection of films could be a great way to spread a feeling of solidarity and support to the Italian cause. “Sempre nel cor la Patria!” was released in the cinema halls.
This film was followed by many others and as a result by the end of 1916 no fewer than 130 films had been dedicated to the Italian war - of these some were also aimed at children such as "La Guerra e il sogno di Momi"

in which a child dreams of saving the life of his father who was deployed on the front.
Although many films were of somewhat poor quality, they undoubtedly accomplished their purpose: thousands of people flocked to see them and became familiar with such words and concepts as "the Homeland", "Victory" and "the unredeemed lands".
Conclusion

In 1915, Italy had signed the secret **Treaty of London**. In this treaty Britain had offered Italy large sections of territory in the Adriatic Sea region – Tyrol, Dalmatia and Istria. Such an offer was too tempting for Italy to refuse. Britain and France wanted Italy to join in on their side so that a new front could open up to the south of the Western Front. The plan was to split still further the Central Powers so that its power on the Western and Eastern Fronts was weakened. The plan was logical. The part Italy had to play in it required military success. This was never forthcoming. Between 1915 and 1917, Italian troops only got 10 miles inside Austrian territory. But in October 1917 came the disaster of **Caporetto**. In this battle, in fact a series of battles, the Italians had to fight the whole Austrian Army and 7 divisions of German troops. The Italian Army lost 300,000 men. Though the Italians had a victory at Vittorio Veneto in 1918, the psychological impact of Caporetto was huge.
By the end of the war in 1918, 600,000 Italians were dead, 950,000 were wounded and 250,000 were crippled for life. The war cost more than the government had spent in the previous 50 years – and Italy had only been in the war three years.

On 04th November at 3.00 pm all war operations ceased and the end of the Great War was declared. Armando Diaz released a dispatch which celebrated not without rhetoric the victory that had been achieved against "one of the most powerful armies in the world."

Before the armistice came into force, the army continued to pursue Italian territories that were lost during the previous year. Peace did not, however, presume that it was impossible to go ahead with the advance but only to cease all combat. In the following days this led to other towns that were brought back after they had been abandoned by the Austro-Hungarian authorities.

Two months later, on 18th January 1919, peace talks commenced in Versailles.