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THE MOUNTAINS REMEMBER: THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN VALPAROLA (ITALIAN DOLOMITES)

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The Italian Dolomites, recently recognized as World Heritage by UNESCO, have been a hard battle ground during the years 1915-1917 of the First World War, highly conditioning the fightings between the Italian and Austrian-Hungarian armies. Valparola, a small valley across the boundary between the current Autonomous Province of Bolzano – Südtirol and the Veneto Region, was a short part of the dolomitic front line where the Italian Alpine Corp – “Alpini” and the Tyrolean Land Defenders - “Landesschützen” – clashed in a peculiar trench warfare, with many casualties and no significant advance from both sides. The fighting was worsened by the harsh winter climate conditions and by the frequent snow avalanches, two cruel common “enemies” that both armies had to face, sometimes helping each other.

This study wants to investigate how the geomorphological characteristics of the valley conditioned and favoured the construction of defence postings and camps, in the sector stretching from Cima Stetsas until Rü Sciarè, passing through Valparola Pass. At Plan de Lot, at the Bunker near the pass and at the eastern side of the Stetsas ridge, the sappers of the Austrian-Hungarian army took advantage of local geomorphology to build adequate repairs and favourable observation and attack points for their soldiers. Plan de Lot, whose name itself stands for a battle field with horizontal topography, is a sort of small plateau formed after a lateral spreading affecting the dolomitic western side of mount Lagazuoi, at an evident tectonic, vertical discontinuity of S-N direction. The natural trench has then been filled by scree slope material, achieving the current morphology. On that plateau, strategically close to the front line and, at the same time, naturally defended by the vertical rock wall of mount Lagazuoi behind, the most advanced camp of the Empire’s soldiers was built. The barracks were dug in the abundant scree material at the base of the rock wall, thus guaranteeing protection also from snow avalanches, while the plane topography was suitable for the baggage and for artillery stationing. The traces left by soldiers (boots, tins, cartridge cases, shell cases etc.) are still well visible on the plateau, making it a real open-air war museum. On the Stetsas ridge, the wide fractures of tectonic origin within the dolomitic outcrop were used as battle trenches, reinforced by man-made walls just where the exposition to the enemy did not guarantee the complete defence. The great availability of big dolomitic blocks, carried to the pass by a rock glacier, now inactive, allowed the construction, in place, of a bunker, target of repeated mortar shootings by the Italian army.

At just 100 years from the beginning of the conflict, this study could be an initial opportunity to exploit the geological and geomorphological knowledge of the area, which is part of the local cultural heritage and an added value for the tourist offer.

