

Austro-Hungarian Fortifications in Trentino, the Value of historical heritage.

I have been discovering and exploring the Austro-Hungarian fortifications surrounding Trento since the year 2000. During my last 4 years of research I have had the pleasure of accompanying hundreds of foreign and Italian tourists on visits to the Austro-Hungarian fortifications of Trento's Fortress, the Tenna/Valsugana barricade, and the fortifications above Levico on Panarotta and at Busa Grande.

There are numerous forts, batteries and other military articles that date back to 5 periods of fortifications from the Hapsburg school in Trentino, of which 3 between 1860 and 1900 and the last two between 1907 and 1915.

The first three periods are easily identified. There are forts and batteries that have as an architectural characteristic the use of local stone from Trentino, used in the construction of military buildings for fortresses' canons on mounts or batteries in barbette. Today most of these military articles are identified by the definition "Trentino style", since they are only found in this area and nowhere else in the rest of Europe. From 1880 the second generation of forts were equipped with a battery with an armoured 360 degree rotating dome. The third generation the so-called period of the standardised forts, conceived by Generale Vogl, began in around 1892 and lasted until 1899.

For the first time thanks to the "Emperors' Forts" programme these permanent works as they were officially called by the Austro-Hungarian military engineer, have been made accessible to visitors due to some work that has restored them to the public. Permanent works in the real sense of the words with an historical value that is ever more reassessed and appreciated by many visitors. Permanent works that seem destined to last forever.

In the state archives of Trento and Vienna as in the historical museums such as Rovereto's Italian War History Museum, the small museum at Borgo-Valsugana and the documentation centre at Luserna thousands of documents and original drawings of the fortresses in Trentino are held and can be examined. They represent an historical heritage of priceless value for whoever wishes to learn about these works.

In 1907 the fourth period of fortifications began, characterised by modern structures in concrete reinforced by iron rods. The barricade on the plateaus of Lavarone and Folgaria were founded with their famous forts, forte Carriola of the Lardaro barricade was built and forte Tombio in the Riva area, to mention only a few examples from this important period.

The responsibility for the construction and inspections of the new works was managed by Trento's Austro-Hungarian military engineers. Trento was home to one of the military engineers most important commands in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The command was in charge of the fifth period of fortifications in Trentino or the fifth generation of permanent objects. The new Adige valley barricade should have been built in Rovereto. An impressive barricade was planned mainly composed of new forts on Monte Altissimo, Vignola, Zugna and Valmorbia in Vallarsa today better known as forte Pozzacchio. Only this last fort was under construction in 1914, the others did not get passed the planning stage. Forte Pozzacchio was the symbol of a new way of building, since for the first time a fort was almost completely hidden beneath the rock, but the same mistake was made as during the construction of the fourth generation forts, those on the altopiano di Lavarone and at Folgaria, or rather the block of armoured battery with its domes, the fort's most important weapon was still on the outside with the domes very close to one another. It was therefore an easy target and very visible to enemy artilleries.

Forte Pozzacchio was never finished, because the prospect of war caused the Austro-Hungarian authorities to change their strategies concentrating their resources on works to defend the hollow of Trento. Work therefore began on Trentino's fifth generation of forts above all in the area surrounding Trento.

Once again the role of Trento's military engineers was a determining factor. In the autumn of 1914 their new leader Major General Franz Steinhart one of the Austro-Hungarian's most spectacular officials, a very energetic civil engineer and site manager with twenty years of experience on the field, conceived and managed the construction of Trento's new Fortress that was initiated on 7 October 1914 with the first inspection by Trento's military engineers' director. The fortress hidden underneath the rock is bomb proof, impregnable and invulnerable. The cave batteries, new armoured batteries and finally new armoured forts were introduced. The latter were initially still identified as temporary field fortifications but were renamed in the equipment report on 10 October 1915 by Trento's military engineers as permanent objects.

The only two prototypes of armoured forts in the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire were built in Trento: Monte Calisio and Monte Celva heavily armed and with a firing power that greatly exceeded the forts on the plateaus. Still today these two forts are called Trento's two Gendarmes by the locals. Built on the experience drawn from the construction of the first armoured batteries under the rock such as the Peschiera battery near forte Corno, the armoured Martini battery, now known as the Zampetta battery near the old forte Matterello and the armoured Busa Grande battery above, the two gendarmes represent the climax of the development of military fortifications starting in 1860 and finishing under the summit of Monte Calisio in January 1916. The technical experiences gained in Trento (above all the systematic use and in industrial quantities of reinforced concrete with iron rods and waterproof additive concrete) were exploited and improved in the building of the fortifications in Riva, at the Tagliata del Ponale, on the line above Valle di Loppio near Rovereto. During the war the whole of Trentino was fortified. In particular in Trento the most modern fortress of the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire was built, armed with 295 canons in its internal ring of defence. "The Emperors' Forts" programme obviously included this last phase of fortifications in Trentino and therefore Trento's new fortress that spreads over a considerable area surrounding the city. Leaving from Lake Molveno the fortress crossed the Valle dei Laghi to the south of Vezzano to meet other cave fortification lines in Valle di Cei and on Monte Valstornada, it then continues in the Valle dell 'Adige at Carli to go to Vignale and onto the Vigolana going down and occupying the Somi ridge in the Municipality of St. Nicolo to Caldonazzo, therefore crossing the Valsugana to arrive above Levico at Busa Grande and this connects with the main defence line on Panarotta. It is also worth remembering the Brada line that from Pergine passes over Monte Brada and Cost 'alta to passo del Redebus. In conclusion Trento's new fortress was enormous. A large part of these fortifications can already be visited using the new trekking paths set up by various public bodies.

Not long ago I accompanied a group of Historical Science students from Austria to visit the fortifications spread out beneath the rock at Candriai, the infantry's armoured gun rack hundreds of metres long and placed over two floors. Whilst the military and strategic value of the impressive construction was discussed, brought together in a small military building the students remained silent for a few seconds staring at some writing engraved on the wall by a stick on what would have been fresh concrete. It was the name of a civil worker, one of the thousands of mobilized workers who built the fortress. Under the name, Vincenz Borcz, he wrote his position: Partiführer, team leader, and the date: 1915. In that moment the students realised a different and no less important aspect of the history of these fortifications, or rather they recognised their human side. Numerous evidence of this has been found such as diaries, letters, documents that remind us that the history of these impressive works is closely intertwined with that of thousands of men and women who contributed to their construction.

Thank you for your attention...