

Analysis of [ITALIEN 1918] by Everett Sharp, Oxford University

(Filmtitle [ITALIEN 1918], Provider: Det Danske Filmintitut)



Prior to the outbreak of war in August 1914, Italy had tended to side with Germany and Austria-Hungary. To begin with Italy kept out of the war. However, tempted by offers of large sections of territory in the Adriatic Sea region – Tyrol, Dalmatia and Istria once the war was won, Italy entered the conflict in April 1915 on the side of the Allies.

The Italian Front is the name given to the fighting that took place along the mainly alpine border between Italy and Austria-Hungary (A-H). The Italians only managed to advance a short way into enemy territory south of the Julian Alps and here between 1915 and 1917 there were twelve battles fought along the river Isonzo, just inside A-H territory. In October and November 1917 after being defeated at the battle of Caporetto by a combination of A-H and German troops and suffering losses of around 300,000 men the Italians were pushed back to the river Piave near Venice. They only advanced in late 1918, aided by French and British units, defeating the Central Powers at the battle of Vittorio Veneto.

By the end of hostilities in 1918, 689,000 Italian soldiers were dead, 950,000 were wounded and 250,000 were crippled for life; plus an estimated 600,000 civilians who had died because of privation caused by the conflict. Financially it had cost more than the government had spent in the previous 50 years – and Italy had only been in the war three years.

The film:

Opening untitled.

The tented camp shown very briefly at the beginning shows Italian troops wearing both the M(odell)1909 *Berretto* (cap) on the left and the M1916 Italian copy of the French *Adrian* helmet.

The second longer piece shows Italian troops at a fortified mountain stronghold shown by the high wall of sandbags to the left, the slight walkways still being cut from the rock by a soldier with a pick axe and the narrowness of the entrance to a trench constructed by the sandbags in the middle ground, into and from which two sets of soldiers enter and come from. The first is a group of artillerymen carrying between seven men an Italian M1911, 65mm Mountain Gun. Normally carried by mules until, as in this case, the going got too much even for those hardy animals and it could then be 'man portable'.

At the end of this clip we see the second group of two men carrying the Italian *Fiat-Revelli M1914.1 Machinegun*. Of interest is the man carrying the gun is wearing a large *Beret* as worn by elite French *Chasseurs Alpini* who arrived to support the Italians in 1917.

1. Intertitle: En farlig passage over afgrunden / **A dangerous passage over the abyss**

Here we see several Italian soldiers making their way along a narrow wooden bridge over an extremely precipitous chasm high in the mountains. The first is a very senior officer, many of whom are often shown carrying a walking stick. His rank is shown by his officers *Berretto* which is higher at the front than that of enlisted men and, as it apparently carries two lines of 4mm lace, he is a Lieutenant-General with two stars on his white cuff patch.

The second is a Captain of Artillery shown by the black single tail and star collar patch and three star cuff rank insignia introduced in late 1915.

The third is the same as number two and wears a white rolled balaclava as issued to the elite *Alpini*

The second section shows apparently the same Lieutenant-General, now without walking stick but with binoculars, followed by a member of an elite *Alpini* regiment shown by his distinctive *Cappello* hat which would normally display an eagle feather on the left, but these were removed as it was found to be too recognizable when at the front.

The third section apparently shows artillery fire exploding on a mountain top.

2. Intertitle: ***Angrebet paa Monticello / The attack at Monticello***

These are elite Italian *Alpini* soldiers who were issued with special equipment for warfare in the high mountains, much of it reflecting the new sport of mountaineering which had become fashionable in the late 19th century. Equipment could, or in fact, should include orange-tinted goggles, white snow camouflage clothing including a rolled balaclava or and hooded over-jacket, knitted mittens, over-trousers and puttees. He should also have been given whitened webbing equipment fastened by straps making the covers easier to manipulate that held his cartridges etc.; however as can be seen in this case this has not been issued. The leaders of the patrol also seem to carry the shortened version of the *Mannlicher-Carcano M 1891 6.5mm rifle* issued to elite troops. Those behind carry the regular infantry longer version; the last in line pulls a sledge for carrying extra ammunition and in extremis a wounded man. The soldier directing those moving up the hill wears the Italian *M1916* copy of the *Adrian* helmet.

The second section again features *Alpini*. These five men illustrate that army regulations are one thing but war results in variation in that the second wears a woolen hat, the others *M1916* helmets but the fourth has painted his white. The first two have the regular length rifle but the last three carry the shortened version.

3. Intertitle: ***Brevduerne gør Ordonnanstjeneste / A pigeon transports a message***

Italian soldiers, probably *Alpini* given the climate they are working in and the poles (*Alpenstock*) required for walking in the high snow covered mountains, the rolled balaclava on the figure on the right and the goggles worn by the officer; shown by his officers *Berretto* in the background who though not interfering seems to be supervising the birds release.

4. Intertitle: ***De italienske Alpejægere uddeler deres Brødrationer til de forkomne østrigske Fanger / Alpine soldiers issue bread rations to wretched Austrian prisoners.***

An Italian sentry with a woolen hat under his *M1916* helmet guards a large number of Austrian-Hungarian (A-H) soldiers. They wear the typical soft, high crowned pike-grey kepi or Kappe, usually fitted with a black leather peak and fastened at the front by two small buttons of that army; and their standard issue greatcoats, while the camera catches another Italian soldier (with helmet strapped to his back) issuing small loaves. The A-H men are clearly very hungry and a scramble ensues for the bread; however, one soldier - probably their NCO- realizing by his direct look at the camera the propaganda value of such a scene restores some order and therefore the dignity of his men by making them sit and calm down. On the extreme right and only briefly seen one of his men is wearing the A-H *M1917* version of the German *Stahlhelm* – the so called '*Berndorfer*' helmet- which would originally have been painted brown.

5 Intertitle : ***Alpejægerne kamperer i 3000 Meters Højde / Alpine soldiers fight at 3000m***

Italian soldiers' camp apparently during the summer months at some height because of the pine trees and the scoured surroundings, however as there is a vehicle this part of the mountains would have been accessed by road. As the camera pans from left to right we first see soldiers who wear the *Alpini Cappello* hat then a mixture who have the regular *Barretto* cap and finally the *M1916* helmet. Note that several wear black mourning bands on their left arm, a personal item not unusual in this most Catholic and family orientated of countries.

A rather poor attempt has been made to disguise the tents by the use of foliage from the trees as the use of aircraft to attack ground targets increased greatly during the Great War.

6 Intertitle: Det store Vandreservoir / **A large water reservoir**
As title

7 Intertitle : Vandfaldene ved Terni / **Waterfalls at Terni**
As title

8 Intertitle : Vandfaldenes Poesi / **The poetry of Waterfalls**
As title

3rd part is shows POW (Prisoners of war)

9 Intertitel: Vaskeriet / **Laundry**

German soldiers wearing their M1915 Field Cap who are, given the context of the film Prisoners of War (POWs), doing their laundry apparently on a ship. As neither of the two soldiers at the water troughs on the right do not display the famous Edelweiss badge to the left of their caps it is considered that these are from non-elite units.

10 Intertitel : Fangerne benyttes til forskjelligt Arbejde. En Snedker / **A POW Joiner (Carpenter) and others at work.**

German POWs working in a carpenter's workshop. It must be noted that all sides tried to convince neutral countries that those they had captured were being very well treated. However it was in the interest of the captor to keep the captured busy and it is very possible that these men may be constructing something for their own POW camp.

11 Intertitle : Køkkenet / **The kitchen**

A-H POWs cook their food, however this would be a very different regime than that we are used to if the man cutting the meat with a very large knife is a prisoner and not an Italian.

12 Intertitle/ : Maden bringes til Fangerne paa Arbejdspladserne / **Food brought to prisoners in the workplace**

German POWs organize their own food for delivery by horse and cart.

13 Intertitle : Suppen / **Soup**

German POWs two of whom seem to be dressed in chef 'whites' eat soup near to a railway shunting yard that can be seen in the background.

14 :Intertitle: Gymnastik / **Gymnastics**

This shows an Italian prison ship probably the one featured earlier in the film showing German soldiers doing their laundry. Here apparently one of their number is showing his gymnastic skills and by extension the adequate calorific value of the rations issued by the Italians to their POWs.

15: Intertitle: Der kommer Pakker til Fangerne **Packets being delivered to POWs**

An Italian soldier on the right stands by a lorry unloading packages that are being collected by German POWs.

Note:

All countries sought to show Neutral countries of their exemplary treatment of POWs; however it is difficult when viewing such moving or still photographs to judge their truthfulness. However, German propaganda sometimes however went beyond belief as with the below photo recently discovered that purports to show French prisoners being given alcohol at a small bar, something that never happened.