

Pázmány Péter Catholic University  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Doctoral School of History  
Director of the doctoral school: Prof. Sándor Óze  
Military Institute  
Director of the program: Dr. Miklós Horváth DSc

Rita Keglovich

**Hungarian War Prisoners in Italy during the First World War**

title

Supervisor: Dr. Miklós Horváth DSc  
Professor

Budapest

2018

## **I. Selection of the topic of the thesis, main questions and objectives**

The history of the Austrian-Hungarian prisoners in the first world war was always out of the mainstream of the Historical researches, it didn't get to the focus of the historians for a long time. First of all, within the theme of the prisoners, the life of the soldiers in Russian captivity was mapped having the biggest impact on the society due to the large number of prisoners. However, also the Russian captivity needs some more thematic and structural researches. Nevertheless, the captivity in Italy has not been investigated at all until now.

The life of the soldiers of the Monarchy in Italian captivity didn't went in the darkness of the oblivion right after the end of the war. In the '20-ies along with the approach of having closer economical and political relationships between Hungary and Italy, some museums, capells and monuments were dedicated to the departed prisoners of the Great War. Good examples for that the capell dedicated to the Hungarian prisoners in Vittoria, or the monument built to the defunt soldiers in the cemetery Santa Maria dei Rotoli in Palermo. Recently, new researches about the camp of prisoners in Asinara (a small island next to Sardinia) brought into the light new and important pieces of the prisoners captivity in Italy. All the above mentioned elements were the main starting points of my thesis.

In the focal point of the dissertation stands the researches about the circumstances of the soldiers of the Monarchy in Italian captivity, which's detailed and structured analisys did not happen yet on scientific level. The frames of the captivity in almost all belligerents (except the Serbian one) were granted by the various international conferences organized regularly from the second half of the XIX. century in Hague and Geneva.

I describe the structure of the prisoner camps, analyse the number of the Austrian-Hungarian prisoners, and present the difficulties of providing a definite number because of the missing documents. As the army of the Monarchy was built by eleven different nations, the aspect of the different nations in the Italian captivity was also analized. The return to their homes is one of the most important topics of my thesis: in the first part, I talk about the bilateral contracts between the belligerents which were focusing on the exchange of the prisoners based on very strict rules. Because of the distrust on both sides, only a limited number of prisoners were exchanged during the war between the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy and Italy. For most of the prisoners, coming home became reality only after the war. I dealt with the difficult

international landscape which for the Hungarian prisoners resulted in a prolonged returning procedure.

The International Red Cross and its national affiliates, like the Hungarian or Italian ones, had a very active and pioneer role in the war, covering various fields. The Red Cross elaborated a structured indexation system of all the prisoners, making possible to follow the movement of the soldiers from the front to different camps in the heartlands. The Red Cross supported also the keeping of contact between the family and the prisoner with supporting and ensuring package and letter sending. The charity organization took an important role in the diplomacy as well providing a significant support to the belligerents. The catering of the prisoners, and the health situation differed from country to country, largely defined by the economic climate of the capturing state.

Important and at the same time a very rarely researched capture of the Hungarian history is the responsibility of the state in certain questions, mostly how they could support the survival of their compatriots in captivity in the different prisoner camps. A good example for a structured, state-supported help is the organization of food and clothes sending to the Western European (Americans, French, British and Belgian) prisoners in German captivity. Unfortunately, we don't see any similar initiatives in case of the Monarchy and Italy. Moreover, the intervention of the state was always followed with suspicion, like in the case when the International Red Cross distributed money to the prisoners in some Russian camps. The other field of the intervention of the state was the punishment: penalty work, the different massive penalties applied by the army, withdrawal of food or/and post which also determined the survival chances of the prisoners.

## **II. The resource base of the thesis, and the methodological questions of processing**

The thesis investigates the source of the prisoners first of all from political history and event history point of view. The goal of the research was to write a monography – due to lack of the literature in Hungarian language – mostly based on the Italian and English literature.

It is important to highlight that the level of details of the different captures depends on the available documentation in the different archives or literature. I worked on my thesis mostly based on the documents foundable in different Italian archives, in the Italian Central State Archive, in the Archive of State Department and in the Archive of Ministry of Defense. I made

some researches in the Archive of Ministry of Defense in Vienna and also some smaller documentation was coming from the Sicilian state archive based in Messina. I also used the diaries of the survivors describing their experiences of the battles and the incredible circumstances which are difficult to understand for the modern people and then the captivity. These diaries are written almost in every cases by officers, and because of this fact, they can not give us a full picture about the every day of the captivity. Writing diary as a privilege of officers is coming from more factors: mostly, because of their fundamentally different social status, as a consequence, their higher educational level (in many cases, soldiers were illiterate) and had better financial background which was a help also during the captivity. Furthermore, - as I talk about in the capture „Employment practices of prisoners” in details – the officers didn't had to work so had having more time for diary writing.

Recently, the Italian historians researched and explored the captivity of Italian soldiers in the territory of the Monarchy and in Germany, but also were born important books about the Austrian-Hungarian prisoners in Italy, I would like to mention here the fundamental researches of Luca Gorgolini about the Asinara camps, Alessandro Tortato worked based on documents found in the Italian archives and presented the everyday of the prisoners in his monography.

Superficially, also Giovanna Procacci touched the topic, although her research field was the Italian soldiers in Hungarian, Austrian and German captivity. Besides the already mentioned historic books, very important to mention here the publication of the life of prisoners in one of the biggest Italian camps Vittoria by Fabio and Vincenzo La Perla. They used many unknown documents of the Sicilian archives and the museum of Vittoria.

From the point of view of the Hungarian captivi in Italy, there are still a limited number of researches available about the topic. In the Hungarian literature, the most detailed and adequate monography is „The history of Hungarian prisoners” published in 1932. Gábor Margittai made some researches about the story of the Hungarian prisoners at the island of Asinara. Additionally to the already mentioned publication of the brothers La Perla, Dezső Juhász and Giancarlo Francione published more details of the history of the cappell dedicated to the Hungarian defunts in Vittoria and related to this, the everyday life in the camp.

From the source-books in English language, I would mention the monography of Alon Rachamimov: POW and the Great War, focusing mostly on the Eastern front. A pinoeer work with the new approach of analyzing the First War is Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau`s and Anette Becket`s `1914-1918. The re-conceived war.` , putting into the centre the psychological aspect.

The most important book of military history to be mentioned here is John Keegan: *The First World War*. I would like to mention the work of Ferenc Pollmann and Tibor Balla, still focusing on the military events of the war.

The documents regarding the Hungarian prisoners and captivity in Italy are very limited. Documents are not available at all in the Hungarian archives, therefore I had to rely on the documents found in the Italian archives. The number of refundable resources are also limited on international level as well. The western literature considers as primary source the memoirs of three highly ranked imprisoned officers. The other source are the essays, memoirs and diaries. These, as well as the Hungarian reminiscences, were written in all cases by officers. The most complex reminiscence-volume was published in 1931 by the "Union of the Austrian Prisoners" (*Die Bundesvereinigung der ehemaligen Österreichischen Kriegsgefangenen*), with the title: 'In Feindeshand'. This work contained the remembrances of 477 prisoners. The historical importance of this work is that it presented for the first time the life of the prisoners to the public. The third important source-group is represented by the post-war published reminiscences and summaries, which in almost all cases were filled with anti-Habsburg rhetoric and reflect a very strong nationalist tone. Among these are the remembrances of the members of the Czech legion, with a strong nationalist tone.

During the researches for the thesis I have published three publications, highlighting different aspects of the imprisonment: time passing during imprisonment („free-time" activities and work), the modes of returning home of the prisoners and a generic presentation of the Italian imprisonment.

### **III. The scientific results of the thesis**

Italy terminated the contract of the Triple Alliance on the 4th May, and entered in the on the 24th May, 1915, declaring war to the Monarchy. The front at the end stretched from the border with Svizzera to the Adriatic sea, 600 km long. The primary goal of the Italian political elite was to occupy Trieste and Ljubljana, and to reach this goal, the Italian army tried to break through the lines of defense of the Monarchy in 12 battles. During the battles, a significant number of war prisoners were captured on both sides. The aim of the thesis is to collect and structure the life of the war prisoners in Italy, following the next main points:

- The international frameworks of the captivity based on the agreements accepted on the international conferences held in Genf (1864 és 1906) and Hague (1899 és 1907). In the dissertation I refer mostly on the international conference in 1907, where the basic moral and material goods of the prisoners were fixed. In the agreement the intangibility of the personal property was granted, except the horses, weapons and military documents. On the conference, it was also disposed about the employment practices (11. article), according to this, only soldiers were obliged to work, officers not, and the work itself could not be in direct contact with the fighting events. One important element of the survival of the prisoners was the food. In the sense of the instructions accepted in Hague it was the responsibility of the capturing state to ensure the minimum food to the prisoners. The prisoner stood under the regulation of the army which took him into captivity also formally. The participants on the Hague conferences disposed about how the prisoners can keep contact with their family (first of all sending letters), and about the free practice of religion as well. With regards to the fields the conference did not accept a common approach (e.g. how to treat the civil population of the occupied territories), there was left space to a mutual agreement between the belligerents.
- International charity organisations, establishment and activities of national imprisonment offices during the war:
  - International Red-Cross in the defense of the prisoners. The International Red-Cross played an important role in keeping the agreements taken at the conferences in Genf and Haga. The primary humanitarian scope of the organisation was to keep a track of the prisoners and, in the same time to keep a registry on the disappeared prisoners. They have elaborated a detailed registry, the basis of which was given by the so-called index cards: every prisoner had a card that was compiled based on a list that was provided by the belligerent states. Their activity expanded also to the transmission of the packages and letters, but also provided diplomatical assistance, for example visiting the prisoner camps and bilateral agreements between the belligerent states. In their monthly newsletter they wanted to keep the civil population informed on the momentarily available regulations and standards. They were active during the return of the first prisoners, and ceased their activity on the 28th of

December 1918. The International Red-Cross handed over some parts of their activity to the National Red-Cross.

- The activity of the National Red-Cross: the main activity of the National Red-Cross was to hand over the letters and packages to the prisoners. They were in close collaboration with the Ministry of the Post Office and the Office of the Censor
- The Italian prisoner commission: it was created on an ad-hoc basis inside the Italian War Ministry. The main activity was to elaborate the standards related to the Italian prisoners, and also the censors office was part of the organisation. One of its main tasks was to coordinate the prisoners enrolled for work and the administrative works related to them.
- The number of prisoners: the estimations about the number of prisoners right after the war were about 600 thousands prisoners on both sides. Later based on other documents, new calculation methodologies were elaborated, based on these analyses we accept and maximize the number of Austrian-Hungarian prisoners in Italian captivity in 477 thousands. The number of the Austrian-Hungarian prisoners till October of 1918 was around 180 thousands. The estimated number of Italian prisoners in the territory of the Monarchy reached the 250 thousands. A higher number of soldiers were captured during the major fighting events: Italy almost quit from the war after the breakthrough of Caporetto (24th October, 1917 – 19th November, 1917). The second significant surrender wave followed the battle of Vittorio Veneto (24th October, 1918 – 29th October, 1918), this anarchic period lasted till the 4th November, 1918.
- National composition of the armed forces of the Monarchy: It is almost impossible to indicate the precise composition of the nationalities of the prisoners based on the documents preserved. Based on the lists of the prisoners waiting to return home there were approximately 100-150 thousand Hungarian nationality prisoners in Italy. The Italians at the beginning had five nationality categories, that later, due to administrative reasons, from 1916 were reduced to 2 big categories : Slavs (here were the Czechs, Polish and Croats) and the second group composed by Germans and Hungarians. In this same year in Italy were created the legions of different nationalities, out of which the Czech legion will have a special importance in the next years.

- Prisoner camps in Italy: as of the start of the war, 83 localities across Italy were designated to host camps or to place people in old, not used buildings. We should distinguish two major types of camps: one is when prisoners were located in old buildings. The other type is the newly built camps which were suitable to place a high number of prisoners. These type of modern camps had showers, health office and sickroom as well. They were surrounded with barbed wire. The prisoners were taken from the front by train, first they went to the so called collecting camps, then they departed to the final camp. The size of the camps differed very much: in the smaller camps (mostly an old building only) only a few hundred prisoners were hosted, while in the big modern camps the Italian authorities accommodated even more than 10 thousands prisoners. The camps were supervised by `carabinieri` (gendarmes) their number depended on the number of the prisoners. In North-Italy, the biggest camps were Forte Begato, Forte Sperone (both next to Geneva, in old fortresses), and Avezzano (modern camp). In South Italy, the most significant camps were Certosa di Padula and Cittaducale. Other than the already mentioned ones, important camps were established in Sicily (Piazza Armerina, Vittoria, Adernó) and at the island of Asinara (next to Sardinia). In many cases, officers and soldiers were located in separate camps (e.g. Piazza Armerina was a camp only for officers).
- ”Everyday” life in the prison camps : the officers and the privates came under different circumstances. The officers received monthly salary with which they could complete the poor alimentation, but they could also buy clothes and cleanser. During their free time – as they were not allowed to work , basically during the whole imprisonment time – the officers read, held theater plays or edited newspapers. The privates instead passed almost all of their imprisonment period with work. Starting with October 1916 a bigger number of work enrollment started: the prisoners reached to their employer grouped in work commandoes, firstly doing agricultural work. The decisive element of the prisoners life, the key to their survival was food. Based on the agreement from the conference from Hague the country taking prisoners was obliged to provide food to the prisoners. With this agreement the poorer countries – among these Italy and the Monarchy (not to mention the ones in a worst economical situation like Serbia, Romania or Albania) reached to a bad position, as they were struggling to supply their own soldiers as well. Due to this fact some of the

belligerent states (France, UK, USA) were sending organized aid to their imprisoned soldiers. In the case of the hungarian privates the food packages sent by the family members represented. In some locations providing facilities for the daily movement was difficult.

- Health situation of the prisoners: based on the official statistics, the survival possibilities of the captivity in Italy were rather good (the mortality rate did not suparet the 7 % ). Mostly, the prisoners were captured in a very weakened condition, in many cases already with chronic diseases and illnesses (pneumonia, rheumatism, articular diseases), or with serious injuries (loss of limbs or eyes). One big achievement of the war was that for the protection of the civil population the administration prescribed regular vaccination for the prisoners. Official regulations described the different disinfectant procedures should have been applied. To maintain the personal hygiene in the camp faced many obstacles. A high number of human beings closed in a small space, and in many cases, the possibilities provided by the camps decided the frequency and regularity of having a shower, washing the clothes. The Spanish flue burst out in 1918 spread easily among the prisoners in a weekend condition.
- Repatriation: During the war the bellligernat parts, in lack of international agreements, ellaborated bi-lateral contracts for the prisoners exchange. This were the so-called „prisoner exchange conventions”. For a long period of time Italy refused to sign these type of agreements, so the first one was signed only in November 1916. As the parts wanted to avoid in all circumstances that the prisoners return home in good condition, to eliminate the possibility that they could be resent to the battleground, the sicknesses and the wound types were firlny controlled and mapped, that entitled them to return home. The selection process was very slow and with many step bureaucracy, giving space to corrupcion and abuses. The prisoners did everything in order to be entitled for the exchange, in many cases causing lasting injuries or inducing incurable sicknesses to themselves. The repatriation for a huge mass of prisoners became reality only after November 1918. The return of the hungarian and transylvanian prisoners, on the pressure of the international diplomacy, started only in 1919 and lasted until 1921. The repatriation expenses of the prisoners was supported by the hungarian state: trains were travelling only until Villach. Due to the

economical situation (lack of coal) there were no sufficient trains, slowing down more the repatriation process.

#### **IV. Publications, presentations on conferences, other activities**

##### IV.1. Studies, statements in periodicals and in other reviews:

- Prigionieri di guerra ungheresi nella Prima Guerra Mondiale. In: Verbum, Akadémia Kiadó, Piliscsaba, 2005. pp. 293-301.
- Everyday of Hungarian prisoners in the Italian camps during the First World War. In: Apáczai-Napok 2007. Nyugat-Magyarországi Egyetem, Apáczai Csere János Kar, Győr, 2008. pp. 704-711.
- Lo scambio e il ritorno dei prigionieri di guerra ungheresi, durante e dopo la Prima Guerra Mondiale. In: Rivista di Studi Ungheresi, 15-2016. Sapienza, Università' Editrice. Pp. 88-102.

##### IV.2. Presentations on conferences:

- Everyday life of Hungarian prisoners in the Italian camps. 1915-1918. Apáczai Csere Napok, 2007. október 18-20., Győr.
- Hungarian prisoners in Italy.  
„A dicsőség babérkoszorúja helyett a kálvária rögös útján”. Conference about the captivity in the First World War. HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, 20th September, 2018