



BELLUM AQUILARUM

SEXTEN
SESTO



Associazione storica Bellum Aquilarum



(Bellum Aquilarum historical association)
Many areas of the Dolomites are in the process of setting up projects to enhance the historical testimony of the Great War.
Sesto di Pusteria was both victim and

protagonist of this tragedy. Sesto di Pusteria is the only place of Germanic language and culture belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire to find itself at the front line, undergoing forced evacuation and displacement, and then, together with other places of the South Tyrol, being annexed to Italy. This chance set of events makes Sesto an emblematic place to tell the history of this period, not only for the Tyrolean citizens of today but for all the inhabitants of Europe.

The vicissitudes of the civilian population and of the soldiers during this extremely important moment in history have so far surprisingly been neglected, undoubtedly because of the upheaval following the end of the war and annexation to Italy. Given the considerable interest in the First World War that is now emerging in Europe, Sesto has a unique and inestimable contribution to make.

The Associazione Bellum Aquilarum (Bellum Aquilarum historical association) aims to save from oblivion the surviving testimony to this tragedy in order to preserve it so that it can be handed down to future generations, not only to the young people of Pusteria, but also to those living in places once belonging to the former Austro-Hungarian Empire that were the scenes of battle here.

The tragedy experienced so deeply at Sesto and in Pusteria is akin to that of many other areas of Europe which were on the front line or which, after the war, witnessed the havoc brought on by territorial annexation. The ensuing cultural, historical and political schism was immense; without doubt, these events changed Pusteria but also Europe itself, and today – in a European perspective enabling the age-old tensions issuing from the war to be overcome – preserving these memories can aid us in the construction of our common future.

The Associazione Bellum Aquilarum is an ONLUS – a non-profitmaking organisation for the common good – recognised by the Autonomous Province of Bolzano; since it is a non-profitmaking organisation, contributions from any source are welcome, from private citizens, associations and institutions sharing the same aims. The intent is to further the recovery and valorisation of surviving historical testimony by the setting up and running of open-air museums, historical archives, documentation centres and any other enterprise serving the aforesaid purpose.





”Traces of our history” Project

During the First World War, the peaks of the Dolomites witnessed a war unique of its kind in the world. The Austro-Hungarian and Italian soldiers lived and fought on mountain peaks that had until then been totally untouched, challenging the climate and the altitude and achieving technical and organisational feats worthy of the first modern war. This war brought enormous upheaval to the lives of the population of South Tyrol. The difficulties and suffering were particularly marked in Upper Pusteria (Alta Pusteria); the population of Sesto di Pusteria was evacuated and the villages of Sesto and Dobbiaco were bombed by the Italian army.

The front line of battle ran along the peaks that delimit the Pusteria Valley, and in those mountains the armies faced each other in a technological and organisational challenge without equal in the history of man.

The Croda Rossa, with its testimony left by the soldiers, bears priceless historical testimony to the wartime vicissitudes of the high mountains, but also of the history of the mountain troops: the Kaiserjaeger, the Alpini and the Alpenkorps, who here faced each other. This war marked the end of an era and the birth of the Europe in which we live today.



What happened here has a value that goes beyond the memory of the inhabitants of Sesto to become an emblem of all armed conflicts. Sesto can today preserve that memory and make it known to all, at this moment of time in which the former enemies are building a new Europe together. The “Bellum Aquilarum – Traces of our history” project aims to save the historical testimony to the Great War from destruction by means of an organised and coherent set of initiatives:

- the recovery, valorisation and conservation of the surviving testimony to the Great War in the village of Sesto and on the Croda Rossa, with the creation, in collaboration with the Natural Park, of a large open-air museum.
- the creation of a historical archive.
- the furthering of historical research and collaboration with the historical institutions and archives of all the countries once belonging to the former Hapsburg Empire sharing those memories.





Photographic Campaign

The testimony left by the Great War is to be found today in the diaries and the letters of the soldiers and the people of Sesto, in the photographs of the destroyed village and in the family memoirs of that tragedy, but also in the works that incredibly have remained on the mountains.

The Bellum Aquilarum Historical Park would like to restore and preserve the more important of these works built by the soldiers that have managed to resist the ravages of time, 90 years after the war. These include communication trenches, trenches, gun emplacements, cable car stations, access paths and tunnels.



The restoration and valorisation operations will necessarily be limited, however, both because of the resources available and because of the need to act with appropriate care in order to respect the natural environment protected by the Parco Naturale di Sesto.

The photographic campaign is thus of fundamental importance in preserving the knowledge of that which still remains but will not be retrievable or conservable. It is important to photograph all that is to be found on the mountain which cannot be restored or salvaged, so as to preserve the knowledge of it. We consider this to be an extremely important legacy for the future, making for a better and more complete understanding both of the events that took place on the mountain, and of our history.



The photographic campaign will naturally also include those works which have been subjected to conservation and salvaging. Hence the restoration works can be developed on the basis of a complete documentation of the state of affairs, paving the way to a correct and solid philological approach to the operations.

The photographic documentation gathered in this way will play a fundamental role within the various means of communication used to inform the public about the Bellum Aquilarum project: web site, brochures, posters and publications.

The photographic campaign has already started, thanks to the collaboration of a professional photographer with considerable experience in historical documentation of this kind in other similar projects.



Mitterberg Fort

In 1882 the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Kingdom of Italy signed the Triple Alliance, a military pact with a defensive purpose. At the same time, both countries began to construct a fortified line of defence along their common border. Forts were placed along the entire length of the Empire's southern border, on the passes and in the valleys. The same was done on the Italian side of the border. At Sesto two forts were built on the two sides of the valley: the Mitterberg Fort on the north side and the Haideck Fort on the south side, linked to each other and to the other forts of the Empire's line of defence by telephone and by optic telegraph.

In the event of a breach in the defence at the Montecroce Pass, the two forts were to have prevented descent to Sesto and access to the Pusteria Valley. At the start of hostilities, a wide trench system was built, complete with barbed wire, which cut off the valley between the two forts. The rapid technological evolution of the artillery, however, made it an easy target and hence of little effectiveness.

Unfortunately, the Haideck Fort has been destroyed, although the Mitterberg Fort is in excellent structural condition and is a magnificent example of a nineteenth century defence fort. It is a three-storey construction of large dimensions with granite reinforcements, fortress gun emplacements and a frontal defensive rampart facing towards the Montecroce Pass. After the war, the building became Italian Military property and was utilised by the Alpine Troops as an operations base and for storage.

The view from the Fort of the valley, Moso and the Croda Rossa is magnificent, its history is fascinating, and the imposing architecture and the wide open spaces offer the possibility of manifold historical and cultural uses of great significance, to relate both the history of the building itself and that of Sesto and Upper Pusteria.

A construction of such proportions and historical, architectural and cultural merit is a resource of considerable importance for the Bellum Aquilarum project to preserve the memory of the Great War.

The Sesto local council has already expressed interest, and, in collaboration with the Autonomous Province, which owns the building, is now carrying out the investigation needed in order to include the Mitterberg Fort among the cultural and historical infrastructures of the area. An initial cleaning operation, together with a functional, structural and architectonic analysis of the structure, is in progress, with a view to defining a potential project for its restoration and valorisation.





Open air Museum

During the Great War, the Croda Rossa of Sesto was the scene of combat among the armies of Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany. For the Austro-Hungarian and German troops, the Croda Rossa was extremely important as an observation point towards the enemy positions of the Comelico, as well as an exceedingly strong defence bastion for the Sesto Valley. To the Italian army it constituted an insurmountable obstacle in its vain attempt to advance into Austrian territory.

The history of the Great War on the Croda Rossa is a story of incredible feats and events: the soldiers on both sides braved the altitude, the cold, the avalanches, the difficulties of communication and reinforcements, and the solitude. Roads, cableways, storage depots, emplacements, communication trenches and tunnels were constructed on untouched peaks and inaccessible crags in what was soon to become a veritable war among eagles, a continuous challenge to the mountain.

Much of the testimony left on the Croda Rossa has by now been destroyed by the changing seasons, the snow and the ravages of time. Nevertheless, something has remained to tell us today of the valour of the soldiers, their inventiveness and their technical and technological expedients in a war which was without doubt unique in the history of man.



The Bellum Aquilarum Project is aimed at saving this testimony from oblivion: the history and the memory of the mountain troops, the Kaiserjaeger, the Alpini and the Alpenkorps who faced each other here – a history shared by the populations of all the countries arising from the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The pathways and communication trenches constructed by the opposing armies can become a sizeable open air museum, with the recovery of several significant emplacements where visitors can learn about the life of the soldiers on the mountain, the problems and the difficulties of transport and of survival, and the tactical, organisational and spiritual challenges that they had to face and solve. The project involves the identification, in collaboration with the Parco Naturale, of the possible communication pathways between significant emplacements salvaged and restored with due caution and philological respect, flanked by the creation of suitable communication pathways for walkers, thus providing the information needed for an even deeper admiration for this mountain. The aim is to give voice to the heroic deeds and the exertion and the suffering of the protagonists of those events, to bring to light the history written in that fascinating landscape of the Croda Rossa, and to conserve that history and that memory for us and for our children. It is an act of respect for them and of faith in the new Europe that we are building together.



Partners in the initiative

The aim of this project for the salvage and valorisation of the historical testimony of the Great War is extremely ambitious. The historical and cultural importance of the events of which traces can still be seen in the territory of Sesto di Pusteria requires close national and international collaboration in the light of a shared and common history.

The project thus aims to create a wide network of collaboration among bodies, institutions and associations from Italy, Austria, Germany and all countries that were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and that have an interest in the conservation of these memories.

The current partners in the initiative are the following:

The local Council of Sesto

The local Council of Sesto di Pusteria is the promoter of the aims of the project, and is deeply involved in the creation of the historical archive and in the project to salvage the Mitterberg Fort.

Comando Truppe Alpine (Alpine Troops Command)

The history of the Croda Rossa is also the history of the glorious Alpini Corps, whose fantastic deeds are impressed on the mountain. The Comando Truppe Alpine has in the past been particularly involved in similar initiatives of historical salvage in the Dolomites.

Historical Institute of the University of Innsbruck

An intense dialogue is in progress with Professor Brigitte Mazohl-Wallnig, Director of the Historical Institute, and with her colleagues. A search for documents is already ongoing in Innsbruck and in Vienna.

www.uibk.ac.at

Alt-Kaiserjaegerclub Innsbruck

The history of the events on the Croda Rossa is the history of the glorious Kaiserjaeger Corps, the tradition and the memory of whose heroic deeds and incredible feats are conserved by the Alt-Kaiserjaegerclub of Innsbruck.

www.kaiserjaegermuseum.org

Società Storica Guerra Bianca (Historical Society of the “White War”)

The history of the Croda Rossa is also the history of the so-called “White War”, man’s challenge to the mountain, the altitude, the snow and the cold. The Società Storica Guerra Bianca, based in Milan, is engaged in historical research into the events linked to the war in the mountain.

www.guerrabianca.org

