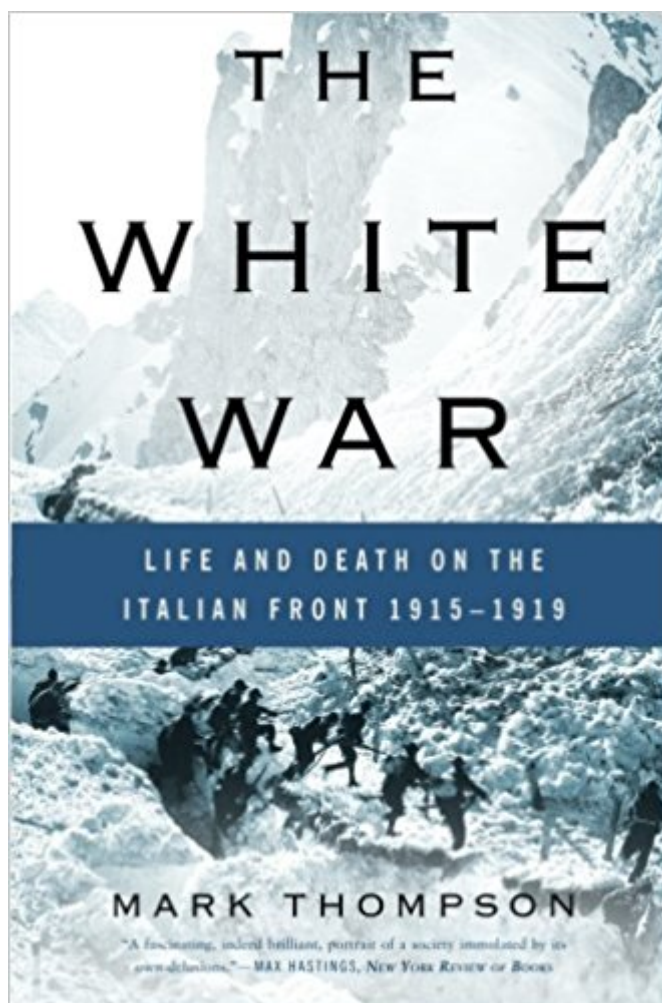


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The White War: Life And Death On The Italian Front 1915-1919



Synopsis

In May 1915, Italy declared war on the Habsburg Empire. Nearly 750,000 Italian troops were killed in savage, hopeless fighting on the stony hills north of Trieste and in the snows of the Dolomites. To maintain discipline, General Luigi Cadorna restored the Roman practice of decimation, executing random members of units that retreated or rebelled. With elegance and pathos, historian Mark Thompson relates the saga of the Italian front, the nationalist frenzy and political intrigues that preceded the conflict, and the towering personalities of the statesmen, generals, and writers drawn into the heart of the chaos. A work of epic scale, *The White War* does full justice to the brutal and heart-wrenching war that inspired Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

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Customer Reviews

It has been a privilege to read in the past year two sweeping, magisterial accounts of a sadly forgotten front, the Italian front in world war I. Last year i read the wonderfully detailed, blow by blow account by John Schindler, *Isonzo the Forgotten Sacrifice* and i loved it. I would have given it more than 5 stars if i could have. This year a second monumental work has come out. Mark Thompson's *The White War* is a triumph of artistic prose. This book goes into detail of the spirit, psyche, and morale of the Italian army and its people, as well as covering the Isonzo, Asiago, Ortigara, and Dolomite fronts in good detail. This wonderful volume in tandem with Schindler's classic account are the two books to read on this front. Reading here about the savagery of Luigi Cadorna's command style, the duplicity of Antonio Salandra and Sidney Sonnino, and the sheer lust for war embodied by the likes of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Benito Mussolini, Scipio Slataper and other paragons of early 20th

century Italian history and culture are mind boggling in this day and age to comprehend. Contrasting sadly is the stoicism and heroic but silent sacrifices made by the men of the army, slaughtered for a few meters of blood soaked ground, usually in the rocky desolate Carso plateau, or the taking of an insignificant hill or rocky precipice at the cost of thousands of lives. The cost of all this was 700,000 Italian lives and over a million wounded. Austrian casualties were roughly half this number. The civilian dead was over half a million more. The bloodletting was savage and amazing, the gains trivial by comparison. In the end, Austria was destroyed, the Slavic nation state of Yugoslavia was born, and the Italians felt cheated by their own allies leading to the rise of Mussolini dominated Fascist Italy.

I have just finished reading "The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1918 by Mark Thompson which is a study of a 1st World War front that is often forgotten but where Italy lost 689,000 soldiers (Britain lost 662,000 + 140,000 reported as missing). That we tend to associate the infantry war with the plains of Flanders and Russia reveals the common myth as this part of the struggle was mountain warfare albeit also with trenches. The conduct of the war exposed the weak hold of liberal structures and politics on the Italian population and the defeat of victory quickly led in 20 years of fascist government. The collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and take over the successor national states by the communists has made it difficult to get a sense of what really went on: Italians and other non Germanic nationals did fight for the Emperor, many of the features of Fascism (a puppet parliament, a muzzled press, a romantic nationalism, a militarised state) had their roots on the political conduct of the war. What made the book an interesting read is that Mark Thomas does more than hold to the historical arc of the events from the turmoil in Italy leading to its ripping up of a long standing agreement to be allied with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary (It took on a secret 30 pieces of silver territorial deal with the Allies). And ending with the desperate mad dash to occupy land vacated by the collapsing Hapsburg armies-it made the most of the cock-up where as the armistice agreement ended the war one day earlier for Austria-Hungary. What he does is switch the narrative in cinematographic terms from wide/long shots, medium to close-ups as the narrative unfolds.

Although the First World War has attracted greater attention from historians in the past decade or so, the events on the Italian front are still extremely obscure to English-speaking audiences. Mark Thompson's *The White War* sets out to illuminate the reasons why Italy went to war with Austria-Hungary in 1915, what it hoped to gain and how it went about trying to gain these objectives.

This is not a straight-up military history, although individual battles and actions are discussed in some detail. Rather, the author tries to examine the war through Italian lenses and provides broad nuances that are critical to understanding the political, social and intellectual factors underpinning the war. The title refers to the Carso region along the Isonzo River, marked by towering mountains capped with snow, where much of the fighting took place. Overall, parts of the book are brilliantly written, while some other parts are probably too divergent for readers expecting something like a military history. In terms of analysis, the author delivers some very pithy commentary, far from the rhetoric of official histories. The White War consists of 28 sequential chapters and one appendix, with a total of 405 pages of text. The book has only six maps, which are of little use since they show only limits of advance, some of the key objectives and general dispositions of Italian armies. There are also 30 B/W photos, some interesting, some not. The author also provides 17 pages of footnotes, a lengthy bibliography and an index. Readers might want to read the appendix first, which covers the failed Italian participation in the Seven Weeks War in 1866, which really set the stage for their declaration of war in 1915.

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