

Alice Schalek's War

*The story of Austria-Hungary's only woman war correspondent in
the First World War*

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Introduction

Alice Schalek's story deserves to be known in the English speaking world. She was Austria's first female war correspondent and the only woman in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to be accredited to the *Kriegspressequartier* (War Press Office) during World War One for any length of time. Her articles and public lectures on life at the front line were both popular and controversial, and her unique style and passionate personal involvement with her work won her both acclaim and criticism. She observed some of the bloodiest and most futile battles in what was, at that time, by far the most horrendous war the world had ever known. She set out to get a feel for how life was for ordinary soldiers in front line positions, and was frequently in great danger for extended periods of time. She had no tradition of war reporting to fall back on and struggled to make sense of the genocidal madness she saw. For English speakers she also has the importance that she saw and interpreted the Great War from the other side of the lines.

But even without her wartime journalism, Schalek would still be a figure worth knowing. She was a successful Viennese novelist, who broke into that male dominated domain at the beginning of the twentieth century by disguising herself as a male author. She was a passionate mountain climber, becoming a full member of the Austrian Mountaineers' Society at the age of 21. An intrepid globe-trotter, she journeyed to more corners of the world than most of us could ever hope to, even in our liberated, jet age. She wrote feature articles for her newspaper, the *Neue Freie Presse* (New Free Press) for 30 years, and was the first woman member of the press club Concordia. While her former classmates were marrying and starting families, she was climbing mountains, writing books and articles, taking innumerable photos, and sailing round the globe. She was still travelling when she retired in her early sixties, and made her final international journey when she fled the Nazi regime in 1939 for a new life in the United States.

Schalek had a rich, multi-textured style of writing that brought the scenes of her journeys and her wartime front line experiences colourfully to life for her readers. Quite apart from her unique contribution as a female war correspondent, she continued as a photojournalist and travel feature writer after the war. At least one scholar in the English speaking world counts her a significant figure in women's writing and culture in Vienna in the years between the Wars.¹ She was also a skilful and sought-after public speaker, illustrating her talks with projections of the photos she took on her travels and at the front. She attracted large audiences to public lectures on the lands she visited in peacetime, and on the heroism, hugeness, terrors and stench of the battlefields of the Great War.

Schalek was 25 at the turn of the century. She was about to turn 40 when the First World War was declared, and 65 when she fled the Nazis. As well as her native German, she spoke fluent French and English, and in her late 60s, in exile, she lectured in the United States on her first hand experience of war. She died in a rest home not far from New York in 1956 at the age of 82.

¹ Silverman, 2004.

There is also a tragic side to Schalek's story. Though she had converted to Protestantism in 1904, she was a target of the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Vienna, in its full viciousness, in the years between the two world wars. During the First World War, by encroaching on traditionally male territory she incurred the wrath of misogynist elements in the conservative upper echelons of society in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a war correspondent, despite her fierce loyalty to Austria and the Empire, her writing style was too richly laced with feeling to provide the military chiefs with the wooden caricature of truth they wanted for their propaganda machine. While her earliest war reporting displays a naïve and unqualified support for her country, she became far more critical of the war in the light of what she saw of it up close as time went by. This double message also seems to have come through in some of her lectures. When she was unceremoniously dumped from the War Press Office she was bewildered, hurt, and felt betrayed. She fell ill, and spent the last year of the war in loneliness and anger.

It has seldom been easy for war correspondents to get to the 'truth' of what is happening at the front line, and even when they can, their reports often suffer the snip of the censors. This was especially so in the First World War. The governments of all the belligerents saw the press as, at best, a useful tool for their propaganda machines; at worst, a dangerous purveyor of discontent and treason. They wanted skilled but 'tame' journalists writing for loyal newspapers who would give the public enough of the 'facts' to set their minds at rest about the progress of the war, laced with tales of heroism and willing sacrifice to stir feelings of patriotism and keep the war effort moving. They did not want too much blood, gore, excrement, terror, or the stench of rotting corpses. Even mud, slush and rust could be suspect. As the war dragged on and its insatiable greed for the lives of young men gobbled up millions upon millions of Europe's youth, the authorities desperately sought the right mix of reality, jingoism and pretence to keep the public on their side. It is no wonder that journalism and the careers of journalists became casualties of the war.

To some extent Schalek was a victim of the ineptitude of those who ran Austria-Hungary's propaganda machine. None of the warring nations really knew what kind of propaganda was helpful to their cause and what was counter-productive. If they reported only their victories, the public could get complacent. Yet too much news of dysentery and severed limbs could put people off the war. In Britain, ironically, it was the terrible news of Germany's stunning victories on the Western Front in 1918 that stirred the British public to the extra surge of effort that helped win the war. In any case, Austria-Hungary's propaganda effort was the most inept, inconsistent and piecemeal of all the belligerents'.² On the one hand, this left room for the harsh truth to leak through: Schalek was spicing her (otherwise jingoistic and loyal) articles with oblique criticism and the ugly truth of the war zone for well over a year before the axe fell. On the other hand, a correspondent would almost have to read minds in order to know what the generals wanted and did not want. It is possible that Schalek's position in the War Press Office was more secure while her friend, Major General Maximilian Ritter von Hoen, was running it, and that her support fell away when he was moved on.

² For a comparison of the propaganda efforts of the belligerents in the First World War, see Knightly, 1975.

Further, Schalek was writing articles for an increasingly divided region of an increasingly divided nation. Austria-Hungary was a diverse mix, ethnically, politically and socially, at the best of times. It was only in the first few months of the war that people pulled together for a united, enthusiastic war effort. When Austria-Hungary's early campaigns failed, when food shortages became acute, when the power went off and the trams stopped running, the nation turned in on itself and sharp conflicts arose in society. This was particularly the case in the capital Vienna.³ Though Vienna was predominantly German in culture and ethnicity, many conflicting ethnic, political, religious, social and philosophical factions were concentrated there. It was impossible for a prominent public figure not to have enemies. While Schalek enjoyed the consistent support of her newspaper, the *Neue Freie Presse*, and no doubt of her loyal readers, there were writers, politicians and bureaucrats who came to hate her.

It is also unfortunate that, in the limited spheres where Schalek's name is remembered today, it is usually for negative reasons that do not stand the test of close scrutiny. Her nemesis during the First World War, the moralist playwright and columnist Karl Kraus, cast her as a character in his celebrated play, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (The Last days of Mankind). The play was a stinging critique of everything corrupt, pig-headed and self-serving in Austro-Hungarian politics and culture. Schalek appears repeatedly in the play as a pushy, naive, thrill-seeking journalist who visits the trenches and provokes enemy fire just to have the experience of hearing bullets whistling overhead and shells thundering round about - partly for the sheer thrill of it and partly to get a story to write for her urgent newspaper deadline.

Over the last 70 years students of Austrian literature, native or foreign, are far more likely to have read Karl Kraus than a single sentence of Schalek's own work. The play is a 'standard' in the canon of Austrian literature, while Schalek's actual newspaper columns are hidden in the state archives. The play has also been translated into English, but none of Schalek's writings have. Even her books on her front line experiences, though popular in Austria during the war, are largely forgotten in Austria today – though, ironically, her book of collected articles about the Isonzo front, which includes scathing criticism of the Italian war effort, was published in Italian in 1977 and has gone through two reprints.⁴ It was also translated into Slovenian in 2005.⁵ When the Jewish Museum in Vienna announced, in 1999, that it was preparing an exhibition of her photographs, the mainstream daily newspaper *Die Presse* (The Press) responded with thinly disguised scorn. It quoted, not her own words, but the naive depiction of her in Karl Kraus's play, thus condemning her to further ridicule.⁶ The Museum's own publication⁷ accompanying the exhibition, a collection of articles on Schalek's journalism, also avoided all detailed comment on the overwhelming majority of her wartime articles that contained criticism of the war, and echoed the prevailing view of her as a 'glorifier of war.' Yet when we

³ For a discussion of Viennese society during the First World War see Healy, 2004.

⁴ Schalek, Alice, *Isonzofront (Am Isonzo: März bis Juli 1916)*, Rome, Libreria Adamo, 1977.

⁵ Schalek, Alice, *Poscjec: marec do julij 1916*, prvedel Albin Trobec, spremna beseda Mitja Mocnik, Ljubljana 2005, Karatanija.

⁶ Anon, "Bumsti und die Welt im Objektiv," in *Die Presse*, 12 December, 1999

⁷ Kransy, et. al, 1999.

take the trouble to read Schalek's work, particularly as it progressed in the course of the war, we see clearly that Karl Kraus was drawing a crude, one-dimensional caricature of her. He was right that she was something of a thrill-seeker, and in her first contact with the front, in the beautiful mountain country of Tyrol, where all she was permitted to see was bright-eyed officers in splendid uniforms with shiny guns and polished buttons amidst magnificent Alpine scenery, she did write jingoistic propaganda. But that changed markedly when she began to see the true shape of trench warfare in the stinking, bloody battlefields of the Isonzo. Karl Kraus' indefensible caricature of Schalek is a shameful blot on the landscape of Austrian literature, and needs to be critically reviewed. Kraus himself has been criticised outside Austria, recently, for his own blinkered view of reality and the contorted anti-Semitism that drove much of his later work.⁸

Schalek was never a daily news reporter, before, during or after the war. Her skills were not in the bare, prosaic reporting of events, nor in the critical approach of an editorialist, but in photojournalism and travel feature writing. For ten years prior to the war she had written to entertain, to enthrall and to paint pictures of faraway lands – which she supplemented with hundreds of photographs. In some ways this made her a good 'catch' for the War Press Office. In her they would have a writer who could describe enough of the front to keep the public informed, but interwoven with feelings of patriotism and noble descriptions of soldiers and their deeds. This would be nothing like the crisp and factual reports of an Ernest Hemingway in Madrid, or a Peter Arnett ducking Cruise Missiles in Baghdad while shouting casualty figures into a microphone. It turned out, rather, to be something of a traveller's guide to the front line, including both its daily routines and its terrifying ugliness, complete with the journalist's personal feelings and reflections.

In her first posting, to the breathtaking peaks and valleys of the Tyrolean mountain ranges, Schalek gave just what the propagandists wanted. This was not so difficult for someone who at that stage was caught up in the renewed mass enthusiasm for the war that erupted when Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary in May 1915, and who was kept well clear of any actual shooting. It got somewhat more difficult in her next assignment amidst the rubble and deprivation of conquered Belgrade, but she shone through with her own very Austrian prejudices against the Serbs and why all that destruction had been necessary. Nevertheless, even at this stage the first questionings of war's ugliness filter into her writings.

The shift becomes more evident when she follows the advancing army into Montenegro and sees the effects of guerrilla warfare, hand-to-hand combat, and rocks that splinter to become deadly shrapnel. The pattern becomes more established in her third assignment, the Isonzo front (in what is now the junction of Italy and Slovenia). Here she was unique among war correspondents. The commander in chief of the forces defending the front had chosen her, personally, to publicise his army from the perspective of the ordinary front line soldier. She would visit trenches, dugouts, shell-holes, observation posts, often coming under fire for days on end and seeing, hearing and smelling war at its cutting edge. She arrived just as the enemy decided to launch a real, full scale offensive, the so-

⁸ Ungar, 1974.

called Fifth Battle of the Isonzo, that caused some 100,000 casualties. From now on she really had been shelled, had to duck genuine bullets, smelt real corpses, and had something terrible to report.

Her war writing could never be the same. To be sure, she continued the patriotic themes of the heroic Austro-Hungarian soldier, the uncivilised enemies, and the sad 'fact' that Austria-Hungary, a peace-loving empire, had been dragged into a war it did not want. But the sentiment in her writing, the flourishes, the colour, the heart, the passion, are more and more an expression of the horror and futility of war. Her day by day descriptions, too, become more and more revealing of the ugliness and terror that readers at home were not supposed to be reminded of.

And here we need to pay careful attention to her special style of writing. As a travel feature writer she was an expert at mixing fact and feeling. She could not look at a battle-weary infantryman and merely describe his stoop and the grime on his face, any more than she could report that the Grand Canyon was a big crooked hole in the ground. Almost every paragraph in her writing is a tapestry of interweaving themes, some prosaic, some from the heart, some from the reflective mind, some from her own fantasies. She could describe a courageous survivor of a two day artillery bombardment but only together with her gut feelings of the shame of it all and her intellectual reflections on the meaning of such folly – or the nobility of his face and bearing, depending on which direction her feelings were pointing at the time.

It was this appeal to the heart, the head and the imagination that made her popular with her readers and those who flocked to her lectures. But it also gave the sting of truth to her later battlefield reports – which, we believe, was what led to her dismissal from the War Press Office.

Unlike some of the world's later, well known female war correspondents, Schalek would probably not have chosen this role if it had not been thrust into her lap. As an international travel writer she found her work severely limited when war was declared. She had to continue to earn her keep, so becoming a battlefield travel journalist was a logical step for a person in her situation. She was in any case a valuable asset to her newspaper. Its owner, Moritz Benedikt, was well connected with the monarchy and its ministers, and all newspapers were free to nominate candidates for the War Press Office.

Schalek was one of the world's first, though not *the* first accredited female war correspondent. That honour probably goes to Kathleen ('Kit') Blake Coleman né Willis, an Irishwoman who migrated to Canada in 1894 and became one of that country's most popular journalists. In 1898 she persuaded her editor to send her to Cuba to cover the Spanish American War. Lady Sarah Wilson, Winston Churchill's aunt, was probably the first British female war correspondent, though by accident rather than design. Trapped in the besieged town of Mafeking during the Boer War (1898-1902), she wrote regular reports for the Daily Mail, managed to smuggle them out, and won Baden-Powell's admiration for her 'splendid pluck.'⁹

⁹ Knightly, 1975, p. 72

Today's readers need to bear in mind that Schalek did not have the benefit of being able to look back on a history of war correspondents' writings. There was no 'canon' of what a good war correspondent should be trying to achieve. Further, there had never been anything like this war, with its appalling human degradation, its total claim on the resources of society, its mind-numbing casualty figures and its seemingly unstoppable momentum. What does a reporter write about such a war, if no-one has done it before? To a large extent Schalek's articles read as if she is trying desperately to find meaning in this increasingly catastrophic conflict. Previous wars (with the exception of the American Civil War) were mercifully short and could be relatively easily fitted into the framework of meaning that held the nation together – as acts of defence, or revenge, or advantageous expansion. Many of the peculiarities of Schalek's reporting become understandable if we see them as attempts to find some kind of meaning and sense in a war that was becoming more and more absurd, together with an increasing sense of mission to reveal as much as possible of the horror of the war so that the authorities might be forced to stop it.

What Schalek does have in common with some of the better known women war correspondents of the twentieth century was her falling foul of the authorities. Martha Gellhorn, who began war journalism in the Spanish Civil War, reported on numerous conflicts until she was finally shut out of Vietnam. She went there as a free-lancer in 1966-67 and soon saw that 'To really and truly and finally win this war we must ... win the hearts and minds of the *people* of South Vietnam.'¹⁰ She also saw that the exact opposite was happening, and wrote a series of five articles critical of the Americans' approach. No U.S. paper would publish the articles except the *St Louis Despatch*, which printed just the mildest two. The British newspaper, the *Guardian*, published the full set. Martha Gellhorn left Vietnam for a furlough and found her visa had been revoked when she tried to return. The door had been slammed in her face.

Marguerite Higgins, the war correspondent who witnessed the liberation of Dachau Concentration camp together with journalist Peter Furst,¹¹ was later one of the first to report on the American war effort in Korea. She was appalled at what she saw of the incompetence of the U.S. forces. At that stage in the Korean War there was no press censorship. She wrote of 'whipped and frightened GIs,' of panic among the troops, of whole platoons being wiped out, of hopelessly inadequate weapons and equipment, of GIs screaming and sobbing as they retreated from battle.¹² General McArthur accused her and others of treason, 'giving aid and comfort to the enemy.' Marguerite Higgins responded:

So long as our government requires the backing of an aroused and informed public opinion ... it is necessary to tell the hard bruising truth ... It is best to tell

¹⁰ Quoted in Knightly, 1975, p.389.

¹¹ There are a number of contradictory accounts regarding the liberation of Dachau. Higgins claims she was the first to enter the gates and that the compound was surrendered without a fight, but this has been disputed by other eyewitnesses.

¹² Quoted in Knightly, 1975, p.337.

graphically the moments of desperation and horror endured by an unprepared army, so that the American public will demand that it does not happen again.¹³

Needless to say, the General won the day. Press censorship was soon introduced.

The New Zealand journalist Kate Webb experienced a darker kind of press censorship in Indo-China. In April 1971 she was captured by North Vietnamese troops after a skirmish in Cambodia and held for 23 days. In her own words:

I was asked, 'If you really are an objective reporter, as you say, you must want to stay with us, having spent so much time with the other side. Do you want to go back to your family or stay with us?' ... I replied, 'I'd like to stay a few weeks and return home.'¹⁴

In her book, *On the other side: 23 days with the Vietcong*¹⁵, Kate Webb reports that she was treated well and with courtesy. The catch came, however, when she was ready to leave: no, her captors said, you have to first write a news report about us. And they proceeded to tell her what had to be in, and not in, the report. She carefully worded a statement voicing support for their political aims, as the price of her freedom.

War correspondents, and their correspondence, are among the first casualties of war. It has been so from Waterloo to Iraq. Like many of her later sisters, Schalek worked under that cloud, and eventually it engulfed her.

Today's readers may want to know where Schalek can be placed within the feminist movement. We find no evidence that she was linked organically to the very visible Viennese movements for women's rights at the turn of the century, centred around Rosa Mayreder¹⁶ or Auguste Fickert. But she most certainly benefited from their successes in making education more acceptable and available for women and promoting more progressive attitudes to women as intelligent, capable bearers of traditionally male responsibility in public and commercial life. One of her novels, *Das Fräulein* (The Single Woman) deals with the struggles of an unmarried woman in a world defined by men, and her travel articles frequently looked at the lives and aspirations of women in the countries she visited. In her post war writings we see an increasing interest in the lives of ordinary women in a range of cultures and societies, and their attempts to gain greater self-determination and empowerment. Meanwhile the lives of ordinary men interest her less and less, though she retains a fascination for famous, influential male figures. As we shall see, she occasionally makes cutting references in her war articles to incidents of what we would call sexism. She had her own struggles as a single woman in a society where women's recognition and social participation generally came through husbands or in social networks of wives and mothers. But she did not make 'feminism' a major theme of her writing.

¹³ Higgins, 1951, pp. 40 – 42.

¹⁴ Knightly, 1975, p. 418

¹⁵ Webb, 1972.

¹⁶ Alice Schalek's name does not appear once in Rosa Mayreder's published diary: Anderson, 1988.

In this book we attempt to place Schalek's writings in the context of the unfolding events of the First World War. Our work on Schalek's writings is original, but our interpretation of the war is not. For the former we have consulted primary sources, most of which can be found in the archives of Austria's *Nationalbibliothek* (National Library) and *Kriegsarchiv* (War Archive) in Vienna. For the latter we have followed well established interpretations such as those by English historians John Keegan, David Stevenson and Gerald de Groot, and Austrian historians Manfred Rauchensteiner, Walter Schaumann and Peter Schubert. One of us (R.G.) has also visited war museums on the Isonzo and had lengthy discussions with local historians and descendants of the troops.

Finally, a note on the translation of extracts of Schalek's works quoted in this book. We approached this aspect of our task with some trepidation. Schalek's writings are artfully seasoned with feeling, ideology and nuance. Their language is the elegant Austro-German prose of early twentieth century Vienna. At the best of times it is difficult to render one language into another. Though German and English are cousins, their structure and thought patterns diverge considerably, especially those of modern English and early 20th century Viennese German. For Schalek's articles from the Isonzo we have checked our renderings against those of the Italian translation in cases where there has been any doubt as to the meaning, as Italian was (and is) one of the main languages of the Isonzo area and there is some Italian influence in these articles. We have done our best to offer translations that are faithful to the many layers of fact, feeling and thought in Schalek's writings, yet are accessible to today's English speakers. Our policy has been to translate the texts as clearly as possible and as faithfully as necessary, rather than the other way round. Serious scholars will want to consult the originals, but we trust that our renderings will give the general reader a clear picture of her work.

Chapter One Alice Schalek's Vienna

Alice Theresa Emma Schalek was born in Vienna on 21 August 1874. Her parents, Heinrich and Klara Schalek, were financially comfortable members of liberal Jewish society. A year before Alice was born her father founded an advertising agency and over the course of the years made a good fortune. There was no shortage of money for the education of Alice, her sister Melanie and her brothers Rudolf and Norbert.

Melanie married Dr Guastav Gärnter, a professor at Vienna's Faculty of Medicine and later a department head at the military hospital in Grinzing, on the plush northern outskirts of Vienna.¹⁷ Norbert, the younger of the brothers, took over the advertising agency when Heinrich died in 1907.¹⁸ He served on the Tyrol front as a Lieutenant Commander in the Imperial Field Howitzer Reserve, and was awarded the *Silbernen und Bronzenen Signum Laudis*¹⁹ (Silver and Bronze Insignia of Praise), a middle ranking military decoration. Rudolf Schalek studied law and served as a crown prosecutor, a military barrister and an attorney of the *Creditoren-Vereines zum Schutze der Forderungen bei Insolvenzen* (Creditors' Association for the Protection of Bankruptcy Claimants). For this work he was awarded *Ritterkreuz des Franz-Josefs Orden* (Knight's Cross of the Order of Franz Josef).

Alice Schalek benefited from the increasing acceptance of formal education for women in late 19th Century Vienna. After four years at the *Städtische Pädagogium* (State General School) she had six years of post-primary education at the *Lyzeum des Frauenerwerbvereines*, a secondary school established to prepare girls for careers and to help bridge the gap between girls' and boys' educational levels.²⁰

She spoke fluent French and English, and some Italian.²¹ In 1895, through the influence of her brother Rudolf, she became a member of the Alpine mountain club 'Austria'.²² She was an enthusiastic mountain climber, made many alpine tours and wrote a number of articles about the sport. In 1902 she published her first novel, *Wann wird es tagen* ('When will the day break') under the pseudonym Paul Michaely. Women were not readily accepted as authors and were certainly not welcome among the social circles of (male) writers who frequented Vienna's coffee houses. Her novel was popular enough to be given a second print run, and Schalek dropped the pseudonym for her second and third novels, *Das Fräulein* ('The single woman') and *Auf dem Touristendampfer* ('On the tourist steamship'), which appeared together in 1905 under her own name. Her interest in travel and in the issues faced by women were uppermost in these novels. Her fourth

¹⁷ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Lebenslauf von Schalek.

¹⁸ Krasny: Auf den Spuren, 1999, p. 10.

¹⁹ There was an enormous range of medals and other military and civilian decorations awarded by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and by the Austrian half of the empire. A comprehensive description of these may be found in Stolzer, 1996.

²⁰ Mazohl-Wallnig, 1995, p. 150.

²¹ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Lebenslauf von Schalek.

²² Krasny: Auf den Spuren, 1999, p. 10.

novel, *Schmerzen der Jugend* ('Pains of Youth') appeared in 1909 and marked the end of her fiction writing.²³

In 1903 the *Neue Freie Presse* invited Schalek to write a feature article about her travels in Norway and Sweden. Her style was widely appreciated and led to a career as a feature writer and photojournalist for the newspaper, an association that lasted 32 years until her retirement in 1935.

From 1909 to 1913 Schalek spent much of her time travelling, often to places that were regarded as very exotic to people in her time and culture. Before the First World War she had visited Egypt, Palestine, India, Indochina, Thailand, Java, China, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, Samoa, Hawaii and North America.²⁴ During the pre-war years she also gave over 100 very successful public lectures on her travels, illustrated with slides of the photographs she took.

Schalek's childhood and youth spanned the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian ('Habsburg') Empire. As the imperial capital of an empire of some 52 million subjects, Vienna enjoyed a huge concentration of wealth and power. At the turn of the twentieth century it was a thriving centre of business, finance, the arts, ideas and ideologies, government bureaucracy and political power. In the 60 years since Emperor Franz Josef I had come to power it had grown from a pre-industrial city of 430,000 to a modern industrial business and political centre of over two million, some 30 percent more populous than it is today.

The trappings of imperial power were everywhere to be seen. The old city walls had been pulled down in 1857 and replaced by the broad, tree-lined avenues that make up the 'Ring,' enclosing the central 'First District.' Along the Ring were built the monumental civic buildings, in neo-classic and neo-gothic style, that characterise modern Vienna: the Burgtheater, Parliament, the Rathaus, the Opera, the University. Inside the Ring were the magnificent royal chambers of the Hofburg and Heldenplatz, while further afield stood the imperial palaces of Belvedere and Schönbrunn. Elegant apartment buildings, dozens of large and beautiful churches and monuments, and the ancient towers of St Stephens Cathedral added to the architectural grandeur of this larger-than-life metropolis.

But Vienna was also a centre of poverty. Industrialisation spawned slums, where tens of thousands of low paid, poorly housed workers eked out an existence, many of whom had flocked to Vienna from the farthest corners of the empire. There were tensions between economic strata, and also between ethnic groups. While the dominant culture and language of Vienna was German, all the empire's nationalities were represented there. Possibly only one-fifth were of Germanic origin. Another fifth had Hungarian ancestry, some had Italian or Romanian roots, but the majority were of Slavic origin. The tensions between ethnic groups simmered constantly, and would boil over into street battles in the deprivation that came with the war.

²³ Krasny: *Auf den Spuren*, 1999, p. 12.

²⁴ ÖSA, KA: *Legacy Hoen* (B/46), Nr. 1: *Lebenslauf von Schalek*.

Jews were represented in all these races and made up a further quasi-ethnic group, though there were often de facto demarcations between accomplished, middle-class Jews and their poorer cousins. Jews enjoyed a degree of security within the empire's laws and traditions. Franz Josef's 1849 Constitution contained a clause outlawing discrimination, though he abrogated the document two years later, and in 1853 there were bans on Jews acquiring real estate and moving to certain parts of the empire. But official discrimination was sporadic and limited. One great advantage for Jews was the sheer ethnic diversity of the empire and its consequent need to practise tolerance. Some Jews were extremely influential. Moritz Benedikt, an important figure in Schalek's life and career, is one such example. Benedikt was the owner of the *Neue Freie Presse* (New Free Press), the leading newspaper of the Monarchy and to a large extent the voice of the ruling elites. He had considerable power and influence among the leaders of the empire. William Steed, a correspondent with the *London Times*, once commented that 'the emperor is the most powerful man in the country next to Moritz Benedikt.'²⁵

One remarkable sphere of Jewish influence, in which Schalek played a minor part, was the arts and humanities. The list of Vienna's Jewish artists and intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century is impressive. Gustav Mahler (1825-1911) became director of the Imperial Opera in 1897, lifting its standards to world class while setting new directions for twentieth century music in his spare time. Sigmund Freud (1836-1939) was laying the foundations of modern psychotherapy while Schalek was in her teens. In painting, Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) and his pupil Egon Schiele (1890-1918) were pushing at the boundaries of art, with their controversial eroticism and expressionism.

Jewish writers were also at the leading edge of their discipline. Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931) was exploring motifs of illusion and reality in his plays, novels and short stories. Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929) brought political ideology into his plays, while Stephan Zweig (1881-1942) developed his own intense style of short story writing. Zweig, von Hofmannsthal and other writers spent hours in intense discussion in the Café Grinostiedl. The café scene in Vienna was the regular meeting place of writers, artists, musicians and professors, and facilitated a free flow of ideas between them. For Schalek, however, despite being a writer and a friend of Zweig and other artists, this scene was closed. Women were not welcome.

Jewish intellectuals were also leaders in philosophy. Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) laid the intellectual foundations of political Zionism. His ideas gained rapidly in popularity amidst the increasing anti-Semitism after the First World War, leading eventually to the establishment of the state of Israel. Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) philosophical interests were more universal. An aircraft engineer who inherited a vast fortune, studied in Berlin, did postgraduate work in Manchester and deeply impressed Bertrand Russell while in his early twenties, Wittgenstein wrote his hugely influential *Tractatus* in 1918 while on summer leave as a lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian army.

The long term influence of these Jewish thinkers and artists on the Austrian psyche has been profound. They are today *the* great names in Vienna's late 19th and early 20th

²⁵ Ungar, 1974, p. xiv.

century cultural heritage. One cannot visit Vienna today without seeing placards and posters advertising concerts or exhibitions that display some aspect of their work. Some of them, such as Klimt, Freud and Krenz, are ubiquitous: they are part and parcel of the face of modern Vienna. The nation that sent its Jews into exile or to the gas chamber has learnt that it cannot define itself without reference to them.

As a writer and a Jew, Schalek was member of this extraordinary group. As a woman, she was confined to its social fringes.

But perhaps the most colourful writer in early 20th century Vienna was the satirist, essayist, aphorist, playwright, and poet Karl Kraus (1874-1936). Kraus would become Schalek's greatest enemy in the Austrian literary scene. As we shall see, his attacks on her would not only bedevil her life, but also taint the memory of her in Austrian culture for the best part of a century. Kraus was born of a prosperous Jewish family in the Czech speaking part of the Empire but lived in Vienna from the age of three. In 1899, at the age of 25, he turned down a job offer from the *Neue Freie Presse* and founded his own journal, *Die Fackel* (The Torch). He had inherited a fortune and was able to run the paper without the support or influence of financial backers. In *Die Fackel* he fired a relentless barrage of scorn, criticism and satire at Viennese and Austrian society for nearly three decades. His articles were cutting and insightful. People who were the butt of his criticism quickly found it was fatal to attempt to answer him: he would use his literary genius to turn their words against them. It was safest just to ignore him. Before long he found himself writing into conspiracy of silence. He once remarked that if a meteorite fell from the sky and landed on him, the press would pretend it had not happened, rather than risk giving him publicity.²⁶

Kraus's chief target was the press, which he called 'the embodiment of intellectual venality, ... a menace to peace already sorely periled, ... the instrument of life's trivialisation.'²⁷

The *Neue Freie Presse* was one of his pet hates, as it seemed to him to be far too close to the ruling establishment to have an independent voice. This enmity was deepened by the war. Kraus was the only Austrian writer of note to be totally and consistently against the war. He was also one of a number of men of Jewish background who, ironically, turned strongly anti-Semitic and who harshly criticised the entry of women into traditionally male roles and professions.²⁸ Schalek worked for the *Neue Freie Presse* and, as a female journalist of Jewish background and a war correspondent, became the target of some of his most pointed criticism. He began his attacks on her in 1916 and by the end of the war there was sharp hatred between the two.

Vienna was, then, a great centre of art and culture in the decades leading up to the war. It was also a hub of political power. An understanding of the political landscape is essential to an appreciation of Schalek's work.

²⁶ Ungar, 1974, p. xiii.

²⁷ Ungar, 1974, p. xiii.

²⁸ See the discussion of Karl Kraus in Silverman, 2005, pp 144-206.

Vienna had much in common with Europe's other great capital cities of the time. If you were to walk down its streets you might feel that the music, the fashions, the architecture, even the style of soldier's dress uniforms, were reminiscent of Paris, Berlin, London or Moscow. But unlike Germany, France or England, Austria-Hungary was not one nation but many. It was so ethnically diverse, in fact, that when the war began in 1914 the call to mobilise had to be sent out in 15 languages. There were nine official language groups within the army, which was generally organised into ethnic units, each of which was commanded in its own tongue. The German speaking Austrians and the Hungarians were the two most powerful groups in the empire. Each had its own parliament and cabinet, answerable to the Emperor but with considerable freedom in regional matters. Between them they governed all the other nations and peoples within the borders of the Empire – Serbs, Italians, Croats, Slovenes, Bulgarians, Romanians, Ruthenes, Czechs, Slovaks, Bosnians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Poles, Greeks, Romanians. The empire was divided down the Leitha River, and Budapest governed the lands to the east of this divide, while Vienna governed those to the west.

To complicate matters, many of the ethnic groups within the empire were also represented in independent states around Austria-Hungary's borders, the main ones being Serbia, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria. Some of these states wanted to expand their territory to take in those regions of Austria-Hungary that consisted mostly of their particular ethnic group. The newly formed state of Italy had designs on the Adriatic coastal strip north of and including Trieste, plus the Istrian peninsular and the alpine lands of Tyrol. Serbia, having successfully carved itself free from the Ottoman Empire, had dreams of a 'Greater Serbia,' which would take in Serb and other Slavic enclaves currently in or bordering on the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Further, there were members of ethnic minority groups within the Empire itself who wished their lands to be annexed to those of their mother ethnic group. The Italian irredentists were Italian speakers in the south of the Austrian side of the Empire who agitated for union with Italy. On the other hand, many Italians were quite happy to be part of Austria-Hungary, just as the Italians in Ticino were happy to be Swiss.

The far north of the Empire took in the southern swathe of Polish lands. Poland had no independent existence at that time. It was divided three ways: among Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary, and many Poles longed for an independent homeland. Meanwhile, lying to the north west of German speaking Austria, the Czech lands, too, were part of the empire. Many Czechs were agitating for independence, a longing that was to grow in strength during the course of the war. Many Serbs in Bosnia supported Serbia's aims of expansion, but Slovenians, sandwiched between Italy and the south eastern Slavic peoples, valued their membership of the Habsburg Empire and would fight fiercely for its preservation.

This vast ethnic diversity made for an empire that was tricky to govern and that could be pulled this way and that by events both within and outside its borders. In many respects Austria-Hungary had been lucky. The reign of the somewhat pragmatic emperor Franz

Josef, and the diplomatic skills of his popular wife Elisabeth ('Sissy'), had brought relative peace and stability since the 1860s. But this was against a background of increasing awareness, among ethnic groups throughout Europe, of the possibility, or at least the dream, of being their own people in their own lands with their own leaders.

All this meant that the ever-present danger for Austria-Hungary was of ethnic or separatist conflicts on or near its borders. Keeping the empire together required great skills of diplomacy, coupled with a readiness to go to war against any of the small neighbouring states that might try to upset the balance. Because the empire was all but encircled by such states, it had a huge rim of potentially volatile territories to protect. During times of relative peace, this was manageable. But it had the potential to overstretch the army by pulling it in several directions at once. The empire could cope well with a short, sharp war in one region, but a protracted war on all fronts might stretch it to breaking point.

There was a further factor causing internal tensions within Austria-Hungary, and in this case it was also shared with Germany and Russia: increasing challenges to the continuance of the monarchy. Ever since the French Revolution there had been fears that socialist and liberal movements would unseat the great empires of Central and Eastern Europe. Germany was ruled by Kaiser (Emperor) Wilhelm II, who not only appointed the Prime Minister and Cabinet, but could overrule their decisions and often forced his own will upon them in an ad hoc manner. There was an elected parliament but it had no power over the cabinet, the prime minister or the Kaiser. The regime was held in power largely by the conservatism of Germany's wealthy landed gentry - the *Junkers* - and its powerful military leadership. As the country became more industrialised in the late 19th Century, workers' grievances and solidarity led to a burgeoning socialist movement that often had Bolshevik sympathies. The less radical wings of this movement agitated for a more democratic form of government. Industrialism also spawned a large, liberal-minded middle-class community, who also wanted more democracy.²⁹ Unlike in Britain, where power was devolved more and more to the ordinary man and his vote, the German ruling class resisted all moves toward democratisation. The need to deal with this internal dilemma and tension was one of the main factors that propelled Germany to war in 1914. Germany's ad-hoc decision-making process also played a part: a very small circle of elites made a momentously risky decision without the wide-ranging consultation that might have brought wiser counsel.

Austria-Hungary suffered the same shortcomings, though with two notable differences. Firstly, because it had been slower to industrialise, its middle-classes were not so highly developed, and nor were its socialist elements. These were present, however, and there were increasing tensions between the conservative ruling class and both democratising and revolutionary ideas. Secondly, as we have seen, Austria-Hungary was a 'Dual Monarchy.' While it had only one Kaiser, resident in Vienna, the empire was divided into two states, one centred on Vienna and the other on Budapest. Each state had its own prime minister, cabinet and parliament, the one led by German Austrians, the other by

²⁹ For a succinct discussion of social and political factors contributing to Germany's decisions for war in both world wars, see Stackelberg 1999, pp 24-62.

Hungarians. This not only made for greater complexities of decision-making, it also deprived most of the empire's ethnic groups of any say at all in the great issues of the day – such as the decision to go to war.

Further, in both Germany and Austria-Hungary the top military leaders had a great deal of influence on government policy. Austria-Hungary's chief of military staff, General Conrad von Hötzendorf, had long advocated invading Serbia. The persistent pressure he put on the Kaiser and the empire's two governments in this regard played a major role in the eventual decision to go to war. In a more developed democracy the civilian institutions of parliament and cabinet would almost certainly have been more effective at keeping the general in his place.

In the years before 1914 very few people considered that a protracted, war on multiple fronts could ever happen. European wars were habitually short, small scale, and confined to specific regions. The war Austria waged to defend its annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 confirmed the point. The country was occupied and resistance broken in a matter of days. Troops could quickly be withdrawn and redeployed to other potential hot spots or held in reserve. When Austro-Hungarian strategists dreamed of invading Serbia and taking it into the empire, they had good reason to think that this, too, could be achieved quickly and at little cost.

They were not alone in this outlook. The Germans believed they could conquer France in a matter of weeks, then have time to rush the bulk of their armies back across the continent to head off any challenge from Russia. As we shall see, none of the great powers had the faintest idea of what would really happen in a world of mass production and mass mobilisation if their armies came to blows.

Like Paris, Moscow, London or Berlin, Vienna was a rich city, the cultural and political centre of an empire of 52 million people. Vast wealth flowed through its banks, business and government offices. This was a time of steady economic growth for the empire, as the benefits of the Industrial Revolution made their way into the central and eastern lands of Europe. But although Vienna itself showed all the trappings of a wealthy imperial capital, the empire as a whole had fallen way behind its French, German and British rivals. Industrialisation had certainly begun to take hold, but it was patchy. As the table shows, Austria-Hungary had only a slightly smaller population than Germany, but its share of world manufacturing output was less than a third of Germany's and its iron and steel production about one seventh. It was less than half as advanced, industrially, as France and less than a third as advanced as Britain. Austria-Hungary was still a predominantly rural country, with only 8.8 percent of its population living in urban centres compared to France's 14.8 percent, Germany's 21 percent and Britain's 34.6 percent. Of the big European empires of the day, only Russia was more backward than Austria-Hungary.

A crude way to compare the wealth of the great European nations of the time is to look at their relative shares of world manufacturing output, compared to the sizes of their populations. Admittedly, not all wealth can be measured in terms of industrial

production, as this does not include such essentials as farming, quality of drinking water, attainments in art and music, or education. But it does give a measure of how well a country might be able to wage war. To maintain and equip an army you need not only a massive and continuous supply of the most formidable, technologically advanced weapons, but also the best possible roads, trains, trucks, and sources of coal, iron and power. Here we begin to see Austria-Hungary's fatal weaknesses. Its 'wealth per capita' index³⁰ was 8.5, compared to Britain's 30, France's 18 and Germany's 25.

Comparison of the Great Powers, 1913³¹

	Population (m)	Percentage of urban dwellers	Per capita level of industrialisation	Iron/Steel production (millions of tons)	Energy consumption (m. of tons coal equiv.)	Share of world manufacturing output (%)	Size of armed forces	Iron/Steel production per capita	Wealth per capita index*
Austria-Hungary	52.1	8.8	32	2.6	49.4	4.4	444,000	0.05	8.5
Britain	45.6	34.6	115	7.7	195	13.6	532,000	0.17	30
Germany	66.9	21	85	17.6	187	14.8	891,000	0.27	25
France	39.7	14.8	59	4.6	62.5	6.1	910,000	0.12	18
Russia	175.1	7	20	4.8	54	8.2	1,352,000	0.021	5
Italy	35.1	11.6	26	0.93	11	2.4	345,000.00	0.03	7
U.S.	97.3	23.1	126	31.8	541	32	164,000	0.32	34
Average	73.11	17.27	66.14	10.00	157.13	11.64	662571	0.14	18.21

* Relative share of world manufacturing output divided by tens of thousands of population

Since a country's ability to wage a full and protracted war would have a lot to do with its ability to churn out rifles, shells, artillery pieces, and vehicles in gargantuan numbers, Austria-Hungary's industrial weakness was to become a key factor in its future shaky performance on the battlefield. Schalek was a world traveller and had seen the industrial power of other nations, particularly the United States and Germany. More than once she would harangue her people for allowing themselves to fall so far behind.

When Schalek was in her thirties Europe had enjoyed decades of relative peace and rapid economic growth. The five great Christian empires – Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia – had a great deal in common and were connected to each other by a network of trade, cultural, financial and social relationships. But they were also great rivals. To begin with, there was competition between them for colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. France, Belgium and Germany had made significant gains overseas but the British navy enabled Britain to shut its competitors out of many attractive possibilities. Meanwhile Russia had the strategic advantage of being on a continuous land

³⁰ Percentage share of world manufacturing output divided by ten-thousands of population.

³¹ Source: Kennedy, 1989.

mass with the north of India and the west of Asia, so it was in Britain's interest to keep on good terms with the Tsar.

Added to this was the problem of the slow disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. As sections of it pulled themselves away, questions arose as to whom they should be allied to or which other regions they might have designs on. This was especially a problem for Austria-Hungary, brought into focus by Serbia's new prominence. When Serbian nationalists shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Habsburg throne, and his wife in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, Austria-Hungary was handed a pretext to push Serbia toward war. But war did not have to happen. It was a decision by leaders who could have done otherwise. Tomes have been written on the causes of the First world War, but stated simply, the issues from the standpoint of Austria-Hungary were as follows:

1. Serbia seemed a danger to the integrity of the Empire. Its presence as a newly formed independent state could tempt Serb-dominated regions within Austria-Hungary to agitate to join it, while Serbia itself had clearly shown itself to be bent on expansion.
2. If Austria-Hungary were to make a move against Serbia, the Serb's Slavic cousins, the Russians, might be tempted to come to their aid by attacking Austro-Hungarian lands in the north east of the empire. It suited the Russians to have Serbia as an ally as this also provided the possibility of future access to the Adriatic Coast.
3. The Germans had an issue with Russia over the occupation of Polish territories that Germany itself would have liked to possess. Germany also had disputes with France over Alsace and Lorraine. This made Germany a likely ally for Austria-Hungary and an enemy of France and Russia if a war with Serbia escalated so as to draw Russia in.
4. For Austria-Hungary, Britain and France seemed far away, but they could compromise her aspirations if they stepped in to help Russia by attacking Germany.
5. Italy was unlikely to be a threat as it had a treaty of non-aggression with both Germany and Austria.

To this must added the fact, already mentioned above, that European wars were habitually short and localised. The Austro-Hungarian commander in chief, Conrad von Hötzendorf, believed he could defeat Serbia quickly if he brought the full force of his army against it. He would then be able to withdraw troops and post them in the Carpathians, on the north eastern border of the empire, to deter any Russian response. Meanwhile, Germany saw (correctly) that, if Russia did intervene, France could come to its aid by attacking Germany's western border, facing it with a war on two fronts at once. But the Germans also believed in short sharp wars, and were convinced they could knock France out in 40 days. This would give them time to move most of their troops to the eastern front before the Russians had mobilised sufficiently to mount a campaign in the east. This in turn was based on the assumption that Russia, with a poor railway system and huge distances to traverse, would not be able to mobilise a large force quickly.

Even if the emperors and their generals had expected a war of longer duration, they did not have a big enough imagination to realise what such a war would turn into, given that all the great empires were now industrial powers and that they had legions of young, compliant, unquestioning, working class men to do their bidding. They were not used to

fighting with massive armies, copiously supplied with a never ending stream of rifles, machineguns, bullets, artillery pieces, shells, mines, barbed wire, trucks, aircraft, bombs, corrugated iron (for shoring up the trenches), uniforms, and healthy young men. None of them was prepared for the difficulties of moving such armies about on the battlefield while keeping them connected to their gargantuan supply lines. They could not envisage that, when they won a battle, it would be almost impossible to capitalise on the victory by advancing into enemy territory fast enough to make their gains worthwhile. With few exceptions, it turned out, rapidly advancing armies of that size quickly slipped away from their supply lines, lost momentum, and bogged down. They were then vulnerable to counterattack, and were usually pushed back to their start line, or worse. Further, the military leaders were so impressed by the power of high-explosive shells that they wrongly assumed these would annihilate enemy troops sheltering in holes, ditches, caverns and pits underground. They certainly did cause horrible injuries, killing or maiming a high proportion of defenders. But there were nearly always enough men left to crawl out of their holes and cut the attacking infantry to ribbons with machineguns and rifle fire. The answer to the high explosive shell was the garden spade. Hence, the generals had no idea that they were about to lead Europe into a cesspit of horrendous stalemates.

But there was another motivation for war throughout Europe, which was fostered among artists, writers and cultural leaders: a war would be good for Europe's soul. Economically, and in terms of the general wellbeing of the growing middle classes, Europe was enjoying a golden age. But the liberalism and wealth that had brought these benefits also made room for tensions to arise. Militant feminism, radical socialism, religious sectarianism and antagonisms between the social classes disturbed the sense of harmony and social unity. There was a great sense of uncertainty as to what direction modern industrial civilisation was headed. This sense of bewilderment has often been referred to as the 'malaise.' It was increasingly reflected in the arts, where old norms were being disregarded and new expressions were being tried, provoking both excitement and fear.

Many people identified with the ideas of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who had argued that only through a profound shock, such as a major war, would the sterility and complacency of life in a capitalist society be overcome and replaced by a more sublime spiritual state. This high-minded desire for war became prevalent among a significant number of well educated groups in all the great European empires. There was a kind of unholy alliance among cultural opinion leaders in the opposing empires, in that they were united in their belief that they would lift humanity to a higher level by going to war against each other. The historian William McNeill comments:

Some intellectuals viewed the war as a quest for authenticity—an opportunity to experience the life of the spirit and to fulfil the inner self—which adherents of "life philosophy" had been advocating. These intellectuals believed that the war would spiritually regenerate a decadent and artificial European society. It would liberate the spirit from pettiness and ignominy imposed on it by bourgeois

materialism and resurrect glory, nobility, and heroism. It would rid the nation of wickedness, selfishness, and hypocrisy and cleanse Europe of its spiritual and racial impurities; and would elevate the artistic impulse to a higher level of creativity. From the war would emerge a higher civilization, morally, aesthetically, and spiritually reborn.³²

Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-96) had expressed the fuzzy militarist idealism and Social Darwinism that pervaded German universities:

The grandeur of war lies in the utter annihilation of puny man in the great conception of the state, and it brings out the full magnificence of the sacrifice of fellow-countrymen for one another. . . . It is war which fosters the political idealism which the materialist rejects. What a disaster for civilization it would be if mankind blotted its heroes from memory. . . . To Aryan races, who are before all things courageous, the foolish preaching of everlasting peace has always been vain. There have always been men enough to maintain with the sword what they have attained through the spirit. . . . only the exhausted, spiritless, degenerate periods of history have toyed with the idea [of perpetual peace].³³

It was this rare combination of social and cultural enthusiasm for war, ignorance as to what a modern war between the great industrial powers would be, a ready supply of compliant young men, and a set of contorted alliances, suspicions, hatreds and fears, that would lead Europe down the road to perdition. Europe's golden age was about to implode. In the words of John Keenan:

The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict. Unnecessary because the train of events that led to its outbreak might have been broken at any point during the five weeks of the crisis that preceded the first clash of arms, had prudence and common goodwill found a voice; tragic because the consequences of the first clash ended the lives of tens of millions of human beings, tortured the emotional lives of millions more, destroyed the benevolent and opportunistic culture of the European continent and left, when the guns at last fell silent four years later, a legacy of political rancour and racial hatred so intense that no explanation of the causes of the Second World War can stand without reference to those roots.³⁴

But the train of events was not broken, because so many leaders, aristocrats, poets, writers, philosophers and ordinary people had no desire to stop it. We may wish to criticise them in the light of what we now know. But their lot was to go through the suffering that began to give the world the lessons we now all benefit from. They marched blissfully to war with no idea at all as to what their civilisation was getting itself into.

³² McNeill, 1963, Chapter 24.

³³ McNeill, 1963, Chapter 24.

³⁴ Keegan, 1999, p. 3.

Chapter Two: ‘Oh What a Lovely War’ – Or is it? July 1914 – May 1915

Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 July 1914 and began shelling Belgrade later that day. There was jubilation throughout Europe. In Paris thousands of men marched along boulevards singing the *Marseillaise*, while women showered soldiers with flowers. There were similar scenes in Berlin, where one newspaper wrote: ‘It is a joy to be alive. We wished so much for this hour.’ Thomas Mann, a leading German novelist, saw the war as ‘purification, liberation, an enormous hope.’ He was ‘tired, sick and tired’ of peace. Walter Limmer, a student from Leipzig, later to die of battle wounds, wrote to his mother:

This hour is one such as seldom strikes in the life of a nation and it is so marvellous and moving as to be in itself sufficient compensation for many sufferings and sacrifices.³⁵

The prevailing sentiment in England was well expressed by the poet Rupert Brooke:

Now, God be thanked Who had matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping.³⁶

The public mood in Vienna was similar. Strangers spoke to one another in the streets. There were excited faces everywhere. Old feuds were forgotten. People of all social classes felt a sense of belonging together, and men whose lives were humdrum and routine entertained the romantic notion that they could become heroes. The British envoy to Vienna, Maurice de Bunsen, said the city was ‘a frenzy of delight, vast crowds parading the streets and singing patriotic songs till the small hours of the morning.’³⁷ Sigmund Freud, too, was caught up in the wave of patriotism. He declared, ‘All my libido goes to Austria-Hungary.’³⁸ Looking back on the scene in later years, Austrian writer Stefan Zweig recalled:

As never before, thousands and hundreds of thousands felt what they should have felt in peace time, that they belonged together. A city of two million, a country of nearly fifty million, in that hour felt that they were participating in world history, in a moment which would never recur, and that each one was called upon to cast his infinitesimal self into the glowing mass, there to be purified of all selfishness.³⁹

A sleeping giant had been awakened throughout Europe. War’s appeal was almost universal among the vocal, educated classes. For those who bemoaned the decadence of wealthy industrial society, it promised discipline and sacrifice. To those who feared the

³⁵ Quoted in “What war was like,” *Sunday Times Magazine*, February 26, 1964.

³⁶ Brooke, Rupert, ‘Now, God be thanked Who has matched us to His hour’ in Monroe, 1917.

³⁷ De Groot, 2001, p. 20.

³⁸ De Groot, 2001, p. 20.

³⁹ Quoted in McNeill, 1963, Chapter 24.

changes taking place in art and culture, it offered hope of uniformity and a return to solid values. To artists, philosophers and poets engaged in innovation and intellectual adventure, it was *the* great adventure, the crucible from which new meaning and the new human being would be forged. And to those who were simply bored with the dullness of life, it offered the thrill of adventure.

There were some in Europe who opposed the war. Recent research⁴⁰ shows that large sections of society throughout Europe had no enthusiasm for it. In the countryside, many feared their men-folk would be snatched away and killed or maimed. The mood there was more apprehensive and depressed than in the capital cities. In France, school staff reported that the predominant reaction in villages was ‘shock, horror and disbelief.’⁴¹ Nevertheless, opposition to the war failed to translate itself into political pressure because the vocal, intellectual, influential classes were largely enthusiastic for it. In Vienna one voice of public opposition was Karl Kraus, though by 1914 he had earned himself a reputation as a prickly public adversary who was best left alone and ignored. Those of military age were not so lucky. The stories of conscientious objectors during the First World War make moving and sometimes painful reading.⁴²

We know little of Alice Schalek’s initial reaction to the declaration of war, as there are few published articles from her for the last half of 1914. We do know that she suffered the personal disappointment of unrequited love in the months leading up to the start of the war. She had, it seems, fallen in love with a friend, Josef Redlich. Redlich was a member of the Austrian parliament from 1907 to the end of the First World War. He was finance minister for the last two months of the war, and again in 1931, when Austria had become a Republic. He was a professor at the University of Vienna from 1926 to 1934 and taught briefly at Harvard. On 24 May he wrote of Schalek in his diary:

She declared her love for me passionately and made a most adventurous request ...to have an affair with me so that she could have a child.⁴³

He declined the request and held himself aloof from her. She took from his response that he had previously seen their friendship in an entirely non-sexual way, and that her approach to him had forced him to realise that ‘I am in fact feminine and have feminine desires.’⁴⁴ She valued their friendship and wrote to him:

Now I see quite clearly that I can cope without your love, and I will. Your silence has forced me to make a clean slate. I lay my femininity aside. Let me again be something of a disciple of yours, completely asexual or like a man, if you would. Allow me to listen a little when you are thinking aloud – I will ask for nothing more.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Stevenson, 2004, pp 36 - 40

⁴¹ Stevenson, 2004, p. 39.

⁴² See, for example, the testimony of Howard Marten in Arthur, 2003, pp173 ff., and Baxter, 1987.

⁴³ Diary of Josef Redlich, 25 May 1914.

⁴⁴ Diary of Josef Redlich: Letter from Alice Schalek to Josef Redlich, Vienna, 2 July, 1914.

⁴⁵ Diary of Josef Redlich: Letter from Alice Schalek to Josef Redlich, Vienna, 2 July, 1914.

The friendship was restored, and after Redlich died, in 1934, and Schalek moved to the United States, she continued to correspond with his widow.

Nevertheless, in mid 1914 she was about to turn 40 years of age and this could have been a major emotional struggle for her. If she did wish to be married or in an ongoing affair, her chances were most likely diminishing. And we can fairly safely conclude from Redlich's diary entry that she would have liked to have a child.

Schalek's first article to appear after the declaration of war was 'A word about Japan,' published on 23 August 1914, two days after Japan declared war on Germany and a good three weeks after Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Serbia. She counted England guilty for allowing Japan 'to violate a central European State,' and warned of the consequences for England:

I used to have glowing admiration for England. But if England stands back and, out of simmering envy, brings Japanese warships and Japanese soldiers to Europe and allows them to enter the European conflict, then history will teach that England has forever shamed and destroyed its position as a leading culture.⁴⁶

Schalek need not have worried about Japanese troops invading Europe. Japan's interest was in taking over German colonies in the North Pacific and on the Chinese mainland. Japan occupied the Marianas, Marshalls and Carolines during October 1914. Then after a heavy and costly siege, and with the help of British and Sikh troops, it took the fort of Tientsin (Quingdao), on the Chinese mainland, in November.

Schalek made Japan the subject of an Autumn lecture tour. She spoke at her regular Viennese venue, the Urania, and in Frankfurt am Main at the Society for Geography and Statistics, for the benefit of German war welfare work. But there is no published record from her of the kind of euphoria that gripped her writer friends in the first flush of excitement about the war.

This should give us pause for thought. Schalek had a popular following among her readers. She had sufficient travel experience in Britain and on the Continent to have been able to put together a colourful article about Europe and its long-awaited war. With her journalistic style she was skilled at putting interesting slants on popular topics. Yet, apart from one brief reference to 1914 as 'the most important year in the history of the world' (see below), there is not a word from her. Of course, there are many possible reasons for her silence, including the turmoil of love's hopes dashed – perhaps the *Auguststimmung* (the excited public mood that August) did not fit well with her own *Liebesstimmung*. But we can safely conclude that there is no evidence of her sharing in the first flush of extreme patriotism and fervour about the war.

What she did do was immerse herself in charity work. She suggested a project in which an attractive badge would be designed, manufactured and sold, to raise money for people

⁴⁶ Schalek, Alice: Ein Wort über Japan, NFP, 21. August 1914 (MB), p. 3.

made destitute by the war. The initial months of the war brought a slump in international trade, leading to recession and unemployment. In the longer term, unemployed men generally joined the army, while thousands of women found themselves out of work because of the fall-off in their traditional sectors of employment, such as confectionary, millinery and fish processing. But in the first months of the war male unemployment brought poverty. This was exacerbated by food shortages brought on by Russian occupation of vast tracts of agricultural land in Galicia, in the empire's north east, and a flood of refugees from that region to big cities such as Vienna.

After initial rejection the project gained the support of the writer Siegfried Löwy, a prominent journalist, feature writer and theatre critic, and Baroness Anka Bienerth, the wife of Vienna's *Stadthalter* (the government representative of the city). The baroness accepted the role of honorary president, with the mayor's wife, Berta Weiskirchner, as her co-president. Schalek then enlisted the talents of the Viennese sculptor Karl Maria Schwedtner to produce the design, which was christened *Das Schwarz-Gelbe Kreuz* (The Black-Yellow Cross). On 2 September she announced the project through an article in the *Neue Freie Presse*. The badge was in the form of

... a black-yellow cross that displays the numerals of the crucial year 1914, the most important year in the history of the world. A black enamel cross lies most decoratively upon the shimmering bronzed eagle of the city of Vienna, while the red and white coat of arms of our city forms the centre of the design.⁴⁷

The badges would be sold for two crowns each. (One crown could buy about 5 hot, mass produced meals. In terms of its value for buying food, a crown probably had the equivalent buying power of about £12.) Not only would the proceeds help the needy, but the badge itself would serve as

a tastefully designed, genuine piece of war jewellery ..., a permanent sign of remembrance of this dreadful year of war and a symbol of concord and togetherness.⁴⁸

It is noteworthy that Schalek writes of 'this dreadful year of war'⁴⁹ At that time (2 September) Austria-Hungary had suffered its first defeat – or more precisely, its first ignominious rout. By 24 August the Serbs had expelled all its forces from Belgrade and the salient of Serbia the Austro-Hungarians had occupied in July and early August, while Conrad von Hötzendorf, Austria-Hungary's chief of military staff, was dithering between the needs of the Serbian and the Russian fronts. Four entire Austro-Hungarian armies retreated before the highly motivated but less well equipped Serbs. Some regiments fled in panic, and the entire South Army simply broke up and disbanded after suffering terrible losses in suicidal assaults on Serbian mountain strongholds.⁵⁰ Schalek might have had this defeat in mind when she wrote the phrase, or she might simply have been

⁴⁷ Schalek: *Das schwarz-gelbe Kreuz*, NFP, 2. September 1914 (MB), p. 1-2.

⁴⁸ Schalek, *Das schwarz-gelbe Kreuz*, p.1.

⁴⁹ 'das furchtbare Kriegsjahr' A less provocative translation would be 'this dreadful wartime year.'

⁵⁰ Wawro 1996, p. 404-405.

expressing personal misgivings about the war. In either case, she was certainly not joining in the general feeling of the glory and excitement of war.

The Black-Yellow Cross was a successful project. It gained the support and public praise of writer Paul Zifferer⁵¹ and the approval of the crown prince's mother, Archduchess Maria Josepha, and the prince's wife, Archduchess Zita. Emperor Franz Josef was presented with a Cross by the two honorary presidents. In the first two months of its issue 240,000 crosses were sold. After ten months 586,000 had been sold, bringing returns of 750,000 crowns, perhaps equivalent to £9 million in today's terms. In time for Christmas 1914 a copyright was secured so that artisans could use the design of the Black-Yellow Cross to make jewellery in the form of neck-chains, pocket-watch chains, tie pins, cufflinks, hat pins armbands and rings, plus statues, medals and calendars. Royalties from these sales brought in a further 87,000 crowns. Overall the project earned 200,000 crowns per month and enabled Vienna's city authorities to provide between 36,000 and 42,000 hot meals per day. In July 1915 Schalek remarked that the project

prevents needy souls, who have fallen into poverty through no fault of their own, from suffering hunger in this severe wartime winter.⁵²

In recognition of the project Schalek was awarded two civil honours: the *Kriegskreuz für Zivildienst Zweiter Klasse* (Military Cross for Civilian Service, Second Class) and the *Bronzene Salvator-Medaille der Stadt Wien* (Bronze Public Service Medal of the City of Vienna).⁵³ In an extension to the project Schalek organised a voluntary war tax, which was also used to provide meals for the needy. She remained an active member of the project's committee until her appointment as a war correspondent drew her away from Vienna in the summer of 1915.

Schalek's first feature article for the *Neue Freie Presse* in 1915 appeared on 10 January and was a report on her visit to the Skoda factory in Pilsen, in the Czech region of the empire. Skoda had been founded in 1859 and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was at the cutting edge in artillery technology. Schalek's article had the enigmatic title *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, literally translated 'The war as a changer of values.' It was presumably her first encounter with weapons production and her mixed feelings are clear to see. She began the article with a stinging critique of the Austrian characteristic of failing to make industrial strides and instead being preoccupied with the arts. She made the cynical comment:

Let the entire eastern world revolt against Japan's outstretched, threatening fist; let Australia found a new humanity; let America grab more and more of world trade – we have Schubert's songs.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Zifferer, Paul: Das schwarz-gelbe Kreuz, NFP, 3. Oktober 1914 (MB), p. 1.

⁵² Schalek: Zwei Millionen, NFP, 16. Juli 1915 (MB), p. 9.

⁵³ Rapp, 1999 p. 26.

⁵⁴ Schalek, Der Krieg als Umwerter, p. 126.

Germany, argued Schalek, had set the example of achieving a self-sufficient armaments industry, and Austria-Hungary would only gain prestige among the Germans through technical development.

Our old Austria has been the leading force in music and the arts in culture-rich Germany for decades, but if we're going to win unqualified respect from the Germans it will be because our fast, heavy Austrian artillery has developed a mechanism that the Germans themselves could not equal.⁵⁵

She looked at the 'enormous pile of old iron' for the manufacture of the weapons, and an engineer pointed out to her that steel had become

a measure of the state of a country's industry... In Austria we produce 45 kilograms per head of population... against America's 300.⁵⁶

Schalek observed the molten metal casting of the stock of one of the giant guns, noting that only the 'mastering of difficult mathematical problems' guaranteed smooth production. Her fascination with the technical aspects of industrial production is evidenced in her description of the design and development of an artillery piece⁵⁷:

Dilation, thrust, recoil, stability, and countless other coefficients must be fed into inextricable calculations, and only then can they be translated into drawings. A single canon requires hundreds of drawing board displays, thousands of arithmetical and geometrical operations. The mathematical and graphical formulation of the famed 30.5 centimetre mortar took seven months, its first technical implementation nine months.⁵⁸

Schalek praised the factory for the competitive spirit among its workers, where 'it's not about subservience, but about service,' and where a technician is

openly chasing higher pay, just like in America, pushing hard breathlessly, using all his powers to produce results of benefit to the project at hand. In this atmosphere, the capable move rapidly forwards; the incapable reveal their true colours.⁵⁹

When a technician hesitated to answer one of her questions about an artillery piece because, in his words, 'the matter is too technically difficult for a woman,'⁶⁰ she protested, convinced him she was up to it, and got a detailed explanation. Schalek

⁵⁵ Schalek, *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ Schalek, *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 129.

⁵⁷ Throughout this book we use the words 'artillery piece' and 'canon' interchangeably, as general expressions for large shell-firing weapons. We use 'Howitzer' to refer to slower velocity canons with a high vertical trajectory, while 'guns' refers to higher velocity canons and 'mortars' to steep-trajectory canons firing non-spinning bombs.

⁵⁸ Schalek, *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 130-131.

⁵⁹ Schalek, *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 132.

⁶⁰ Schalek, *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 133-134.

insisted on being taken seriously as an intelligent, technically capable person in a society where women were treated as intellectually inferior. She commented:

I object to the notion that the female nature is not born to cope with Michelangelo's art, Nietzsche's philosophy or Richard Strauss' music, and yet they set a 13 year old schoolgirl to solve mathematical problems.⁶¹

But when she turned her thoughts from the technical challenge of the factory to consider the aim and purpose of its products, she noted that her mood changed 'suddenly to grey.' She was particularly unsettled to be shown the shrapnel, designed to work 'against life', and the workrooms where the shells were assembled:

In the upper chamber are placed 300 steel balls; in the lower chamber explosive powder. The firing charges were delicately sewn into their bags by young women. In the cosy sewing room with its purring sewing machines, it really doesn't look at all like death is being prepared.⁶²

Schalek uses the word 'sew' three times in two short sentences. It is uncharacteristic of her style to repeat words except for good reason. Here it provides contrast: the homely, purring atmosphere of the sewing room sets a backdrop of tranquillity against the harsh contrast of the machinery of death. This does not necessarily imply any personal or political objection to the war, but does at least show she is being honest about her feelings – a characteristic that would strongly colour her writing in her last year as a war correspondent.

As if to make her misgivings about killing clear, she continues:

But I take one of the metal balls [of shrapnel] and quickly hide it away... That's certainly not patriotic, for perhaps I've – God condemn me! – saved a Russian life. But I can't regret that.⁶³

Schalek expresses a similar sentiment in an article in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 9 May 1915. Here she reports on a visit to a scrap metal collection in Vienna for recycling into war materials. She plays on the themes of life and death with a subtle irony, setting these alongside themes of children's play and the mechanisms of death:

Through the war metal collection, dead, unwanted metal is wakened to new life – admittedly, to a life that will administer death. We who see this war above all as a means to lasting peace fervently hope that this 'Rosita' [a tiny zinc doll] may be shrapnel only for a short time, for we'd rather produce Rositas than shrapnel.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Schalek, *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 134.

⁶² Schalek: *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 137.

⁶³ Schalek: *Der Krieg als Umwerter*, p. 137.

⁶⁴ Schalek, Alice: *Die Kriegsmetallsammlung*, NFP, 9. Mai 1915 (MB), p. 17

Like many others throughout Europe, she was unaware that the war was bogging down into a seemingly unstoppable quagmire and hoped that the production of shrapnel would only last 'for a short time.' But Austria-Hungary had still not achieved its initial aim of conquering Serbia. Its armies had now twice made gains in the west of the country, only to be expelled by determined Serbian forces. To repel the second invasion, in November, the Serb King Peter had released all his conscript soldiers and called only for volunteers. The aging King himself appeared at the front line in battle dress, rifle in hand, and the effect on his troops was inspirational. By December 15 the last Austro-Hungarian units had been driven back to Bosnia. Austria had lost some 80,000 troops in the five month campaign and was back at its start line.

Even worse, the empire's northern armies were under terrible pressure from the Russians in Galicia. The battles between the Russians and the Central Powers in 1914 were of titanic proportions. Over 100 army divisions hammered away at each other for five months, at times seeking to outwit each other with giant pincer movements, at times in massive head-on clashes. When winter put a temporary halt to fighting, vast swathes of Austro-Hungarian land had been overrun and some of its best and most professional fighting units were devastated and would never recover. Of the 3,350,000 men the empire had enlisted, 1,268,000 had been lost. As an independent fighting force, Austria-Hungary was permanently crippled. In the words of John Keegan:

Never again would the Imperial and Royal Army unilaterally initiate an offensive operation or deliver a conclusion an Austrian commander could claim as his own. Thereafter, whether in the conflict with Russia or in the coming war with Italy, its victories – Gorlice, Carpietto – would be won only because of German help and under German supervision... Henceforward it would always fight as the German army's junior and increasingly failing partner.⁶⁵

But there was worse to come. In January Austrian commander in chief Conrad sought to exploit a perceived Russian weakness by making one more thrust. With the best of his remaining troops and the help of a German division he initially managed to drive the Russians back. But fresh, hardy Russian troops and the bitter cold of winter were too much for his men. By the beginning of April the Russians were dominating the front in the Carpathian mountain area and contemplating a breakthrough over the crests to the Hungarian plains. The Austro-Hungarian fort of Przemyśl and its garrison of 117,000 soldiers had surrendered, and a further 80,000 troops had been lost.

Austria-Hungary had never wanted a war against Russia but was now bleeding to death on the Russian front. The Germans and Russians, too, had suffered heavy losses. But Russia was a vast land and its war effort had not yet got into top gear. At one point Conrad even suggested that Austria-Hungary should strike a separate peace with the Russians. 'Why', he wondered, 'should Austria-Hungary bleed needlessly?'⁶⁶ A deep distrust was developing between Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Austrians were

⁶⁵ Keegan, John, 1999, p. 183.

⁶⁶ De Groot, 2001, p. 57.

angry that Germany was setting the agenda of the war, while the Germans were frustrated that Austria-Hungary's armies could not win victories by themselves.

On 23 May Austria-Hungary's fortunes would plunge further, when Italy declared war on its northern neighbour. A few weeks later Schalek would take up her first assignment as an accredited war correspondent.

Chapter Three: The hills are alive with the sound of mortars: Tyrol 1915

For the first year of the war Italy had remained neutral. A treaty of 1882 gave it a loose connection with the Central Powers, but in 1914 it had no particular interest in the cause of either the Central Powers or the Entente.⁶⁷ Like Romania and Greece, Italy preferred to wait on the sidelines to see where its best interests could be served. But by early 1915 it perceived Austria-Hungary's weakness, and the British were making strenuous diplomatic efforts to enlist it with the Entente. Under the Treaty of London, a secret agreement signed between Italy and Britain on 26 April 1915, Italy would be rewarded for making war on the Central Powers by being assured of the territory it coveted in Trentino (Tyrol), the Trieste coastal strip and the Istrian peninsular. This would enlarge its domain to include hundreds of thousands of Italian speakers from the Habsburg Empire, plus some 600,000 South Slavs (mostly Slovenians) and 230,000 Germans. On 29 April it joined the Entente and on 23 May declared war – not on the entire block of Central Powers but on the more manageable and apparently less dangerous target of Austria-Hungary.

The Austrians were furious. They had reckoned with complete and continuing neutrality from Italy, which they regarded as a friend if not an ally, and saw its turnaround as a great betrayal. Since Italy and the Austrian half of the Empire shared a common border, German speaking Austria was now directly threatened for the first time. Austria's waning public enthusiasm for the war got a shot of new life. Racial stereotypes and prejudices, long simmering beneath the surface, came loudly out into the open.

Alice Schalek's first article after Italy's declaration of war shows anger and prejudice not seen in her earlier writings. She cites the example of an Italian mountaineer, Benvenuto Lorenzetti, who, she said:

... had the same national trait as other Italians who hike over the border, the same, in fact, as the Italians in our empire: he hates to wash, and seldom does so.⁶⁸

She concluded that a nation who did not even value personal cleanliness would be easy to beat in a war, so Austria-Hungary had nothing to fear. In this she was echoing a sentiment that was common in the propaganda apparatuses of the Great Powers. Promoting the cultural inferiority of one's enemies was one of the ways they justified their war effort.⁶⁹

Two months later Schalek was accredited as a war correspondent with the *Kriegspressesquartier* (War Press Office). Her articles would continue to be published in

⁶⁷ The word 'Entente' was used during the First World War to refer to France, Britain, Russia and their allies, while 'Central Powers' referred to Germany, Austria-Hungary and their allies. We follow this convention in this book.

⁶⁸ Schalek, Alice: *Tiroler Bergführer*, NFP, 7. Juli 1915 (MB), S. 2.

⁶⁹ Cf. Mommsen, 1996, p. 1.

the *Neue Freie Presse* but also in the *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* (Midday Berlin News), the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* (Latest Munich News) and the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (Berlin Illustrated News).

Austria-Hungary's War Press Office was well-organised and generously funded. Its first director was Major General Maximilian Ritter von Hoen, a war historian, who later established the *Kriegsarchiv* (War Archive). Von Hoen was a much loved leader who became a friend and mentor to Schalek in the course of her work. Like the press sections of all the warring powers, the Austro-Hungarian War Press Office sought to control its journalists very closely. Correspondents were sometimes brought to the general vicinity of a war zone in well controlled groups, but few of them ever set foot in a trench at an actual front line position, and some never ventured further than the central office on the home front. They were given daily 'reports' of battles by military chiefs of staff and were free to embellish these within limits set by propaganda and censorship requirements. Their subsequent articles were then read by censors and trimmed accordingly.

The War Press Office also had to abide by the dictates of the *Kriegsüberwachungsamt* (War Surveillance Unit), a body charged with setting standards of censorship throughout the empire.

Schalek was unique in the War Press Office because in her third, fourth and fifth assignments she was continuously at the sharp end of the front line, spending time in trenches, foxholes, dugouts, observation posts and rest areas (where she was often also under fire). But in her first assignment she had to make do with a back seat, along with her colleagues.

The American correspondent Arthur Ruhl had the experience of military press corps in a number of countries in the First World War and commented on the somewhat grandiose style of Austria-Hungary's compared to those of other countries. Accredited correspondents were housed in large groups at accommodation centres near, but not too close to, the front line, where they had all the privileges and comforts of higher ranking officers. They ate with the officers and were often given personal servants. Ruhl describes once such centre on the eastern front in 1915:

It was to this village — the most novel part of the scheme — that I had come that afternoon, and here some thirty or forty correspondents were living, writing past adventures, setting forth on new ones, or merely inviting their souls for the moment under a regime which combined the functions of tourists' bureau, rest-cure, and a sort of military club.

For the time being they were part of the army — fed, lodged, and transported at the army's expense, and unable to leave without formal military permission. They were supposed to 'enlist for the whole war,' so to speak, and most of the Austro-Hungarian and German correspondents had so remained — some had even

written books there — but observers from neutral countries were permitted to leave when they felt they had seen enough.⁷⁰

Ruhl reports that during a battle it was all but impossible for a correspondent to be at or near the actual front line, as the generals were concerned about the possible betrayal of strategic information if a correspondent were captured by the enemy. This was almost certainly the set of constraints Schalek was faced with in the first few months of her career as a war correspondent.

Schalek's first assignment, on a four week trial basis, was with a group of correspondents in Tyrol, an alpine region in the south of Austria that extended toward the fertile and industrially advanced northern area of Italy. She was intimately familiar with the region through numerous mountain climbing expeditions and brought her own spiritual connection to the landscape. The *Neue Freie Presse* reflected the level of public interest in her appointment when it reported, on 23 July, 'Yesterday the writer Alice Schalek travelled to the southern theatre of war.'⁷¹ The assignment lasted until 19 August and brought her to the Stilfser Joch, the Tonalesstrasse, Riva, the Ponalestrasse, Lavarone, Judikarien, the Pordojoch, the Col die Cuo, Vigo di Fassa und Dossaccio⁷².

In this initial four weeks it is doubtful whether she saw any action. It was difficult for large armies to manoeuvre among the alpine peaks of the Tyrolean ranges. Once each of the opposing armies had taken up its hilltop defensive positions there was little to be gained by either side attacking in strength. Though there were some fierce battles, with big losses, the front quickly turned into a stalemate, with sporadic attempts to bombard or take individual mountain strongholds. Schalek's reports tend to reveal that she and her colleagues were kept well behind the forward lines of defence.

Her first report was published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 12 August under the headline, 'War report from Tyrol. At an altitude of 3000 (sic) metres. By Alice Schalek. The first and so far only female correspondent accredited to the War Press Office.'⁷³ In the report she described her first meeting with the Tyrolean army commander, General Viktor Graf Dankl von Krasnik:

The sharply drawn form of the famous army leader Dankl stands before me with imposing presence. I hear his solemn address, but it's like a dream to me. This near legendary historic personality holds me under his spell, and reality escapes me for an instant. This reception by the commander means for me, as it were, the opening phrase of my journey to the front. With a kindly greeting the all-powerful farewells me. And now southward, to the heart of war-torn Tyrol.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ruhl, Arthur, 2001, p.1.

⁷¹ Anon: NFP, 23. Juli 1915 (MB), p. 11.

⁷² Cf.: ÖSA, KA: Nachlass Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Lebenslauf von Alice Schalek.

⁷³ Cf: NFP, 15. August 1915 (MB), p. 15. Schalek saw fit to correct the headline by reporting that there was in fact an American female correspondent, a 'Miss Blyth' at the front before her. We have not yet been able to track this person's work or find any reference to her in any other published work.

⁷⁴ Schalek: In der Höhe, NFP, 12. August 1915 (MB), p. 1.

This very feeling-centred report is an example of the awe in which Schalek appears to have held Austria-Hungary's leading military officers – seen again in her later descriptions of Field Marshall von Borojević, on the Isonzo front. Male war correspondents were far more cut and dried in their reports, speaking mostly of dates, times, places, elevations, and numbers of shells. They would hardly describe a general's greeting as 'kindly.' The word ('*gütig*' in German) would be more aptly used of a benevolent father. We will see, however, that Schalek's emotional response to what she saw at the front was a central characteristic of her war reporting. At times this can make her seem to be in quite a different world from the suffering inherent in a gigantic conflict; yet at other times it brings the truth of this suffering powerfully to her readers. It could also give her a sensitivity to the feelings and concerns of front line soldiers. In the following passage she relates what happened to a soldier when asked to tell of his battle experience when he was home on leave:

He would be asked to tell about it. He would try, but would quickly see that no one was listening. What to him is so important, is remote from them. Then for a few days he would be afraid, and avoid his old friends. He would keep his inner eyes shut, as if blind, as if he had lost his balance. Then he would realise that he would never again belong, with his soul, to those at home. They knew the war only from the newspapers and spoke of it as politics when they chatted around him. He would seal up his heart and go about in the great bustle, but no one would get to know him – as I have today.⁷⁵

This feeling is found in soldiers' reports from all the warring nations. An English munitions worker, Mabel Lethbridge, commented on troops home on leave:

When my father and brothers, uncles, relatives and friends came home on leave and were staying or visiting at our house, I noticed a strange lack of ability to communicate with us. They couldn't tell us what it was really like. They would perhaps make a joke, but you'd feel it sounded hollow, as if there was nothing to laugh about. They were restless at home, they didn't want to stay, they wanted to get back to the front. They always expressed a desire to finish it.⁷⁶

Erich Maria Remarque witnesses to a similar phenomenon in his novel, *Im Westen nichts Neues* ('All quiet on the western front'), where the narrator, Private Paul Bäumer, speaks of his time on leave:

I can't come to terms with things here any more, it's another world. Some people ask questions, others don't, and you can see that they are pleased with themselves for not asking; they often even say with an understanding look on their faces that it's impossible to talk about it at all. They make a big thing of it.

⁷⁵ Schalek: In der Höhe, NFP, 12. August 1915 (MBp. 2.

⁷⁶ Arthur, 2002, p. 170.

I like being alone best, with no-one to disturb me... I can't find any real point of contact.⁷⁷

Despite her many somewhat unrealistic observations at this stage in her war reporting, Schalek shows genuine and sensitive insight in seeing and articulating this phenomenon.

The theme of the home front's lack of appreciation and understanding of the battle front and the sacrifice and courage of the soldiers becomes more and more evident in Schalek's reports. As the war worsened she saw her work in the War Press Office as an opportunity to present people on the home front with realities faced by those doing the fighting, and she was convinced that for this reason she and other war correspondents were always appreciated by those at the front.

Nevertheless at this stage she had very little understanding of the realities of war in the Alps. Her own romantic associations with the Tyrolean mountains led her to such incongruous observations as:

Shooting in the land of perpetual ice! Whoever can bear that has no Fatherland.⁷⁸

In her second article from Tyrol, entitled 'In the unredeemed regions,' Schalek concerned herself with the Irredentists, Italians living within the empire who agitated for a union of the border regions with Italy. The Irredentists were a small minority of Habsburg Italians, but their aspirations were latched onto by the Italian government to justify its desire for territorial expansion.⁷⁹ Schalek reported on a conversation with a second lieutenant, who told her:

When the declaration of war came and the disloyal elements beat it over the border, we got a surprise: there were so few of them. They were stirrers, who had known for ages that you can make a big impact with just a small cry. Now all sides can see that the famous Irredenta was only too often playing nothing more than a clever game. The shrill phrases that were printed in all the northern Italian newspapers and on thousands of copies of brochures smuggled over the borders served only to turn a few heads and hinder good judgement.⁸⁰

Schalek then returned to her theme of the moral inferiority of the Italians. An Italian unit had failed to take a hilltop from Austro-Hungarian troops because of slowness in capitalising on an advantage they had won. This brought to mind the stereotype of the 'late' Italian:

This little bit of carelessness has serious consequences. It seems typical of the Italians and proves that the lateness of their trains, the lost luggage and the letters

⁷⁷ Remarque, 1996, p. 120-121. Readers may wish to compare this with the earlier translation by A.W. Wheen, of 1929.

⁷⁸ Schalek: In der Höhe, NFP, 12. August 1915 (MBp. 3.

⁷⁹ Cf.: Romano, 1998, p. 14-18.

⁸⁰ Schalek, Alice: Kriegsbilder aus Tirol. In den unerlösten Gebieten, NFP, 17. August 1915 (MB), p. 2.

gone missing in the mail, which have so often annoyed us all, have been symptoms of their coming defeat. A chain of apparently insignificant failures of duty and lack of punctuality combine to make a slackness that no amount of heroism or strategising can overcome.⁸¹

In fact, it was the efficiency of the Italian rail system that enabled Italy's chief of Military staff, General Luigi Cadorna, to reinforce and resupply his troops so effectively through two years of bloody stalemate on the Isonzo front. Schalek would later come to have respect for the Italian war effort, but at this stage she was working in a theoretical vacuum. She went on to suggest that the Italians' tardiness and their false assumptions of widespread support among Italian speakers within the empire would contribute to a speedy victory for Austria-Hungary. 'Ironically,' she said, Irredentists 'have done us an immeasurable service.'⁸² Her arguments were poorly grounded but would have struck a chord with Austrians who were impatient for victory over this apparently inferior nation that had betrayed its neighbour by declaring war.

In her next article, 'Tyrol as a fortress,' Schalek adopts a romanticised view of the front, quite at odds with the soldiers' reality and indicative of her as yet minimal acquaintance with the battle zone:

The whole thing is so magnificently organised, so thoroughly thought out and put together, and everything else is so completely shut out of the region, that the observer completely forgets the region's former cultural life and feels nothing other than a kind of diabolical enjoyment.⁸³

She compared the Alpine military scene to a world fair exhibition and expressed her regret that not everyone could come and enjoy observing it. While she was sincere in her admiration of the army as an efficient organisation, she as yet showed not the faintest understanding of what the soldier in his forward defensive position was going through. She then returned to her earlier theme of Austria-Hungary's inefficiency and lack of competitiveness, surmising:

You try almost wistfully to picture what our Fatherland could become if all these gifted minds and skilful hands, which have worked together to achieve so much, would unite for a common cause in peacetime. If unselfish workers, true to their duty, would stand at every workplace, dedicated to the task at hand, imagine what Austria could become!⁸⁴

She also saw the war – or at least its expression at a safe distance behind the front lines – as a great freedom from the constraints and conventions of life in the city, where 'men of action' did what was needed, rather than what society expected of them. She believed she saw this pioneering spirit in a citizens' army:

⁸¹ Schalek: In den unerlösten Gebieten, NFP, 17. August 1915 (MB), p. 2-3.

⁸² Schalek: In den unerlösten Gebieten, NFP, 17. August 1915 (MB), p. 4.

⁸³ Schalek, Alice: Kriegsbilder aus Tirol. Tirol als Festung, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 2.

⁸⁴ Schalek: Tirol als Festung, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 2.

Adventurousness has taken hold of them and they taste the thrill of danger. The romance of adventure has thrown aside the signposts and fences of their solid, staid existence and raised up broad untrodden paths and unclimbed hills... The beckoning magic of being unencumbered now enchants bank tellers, lawyers, tailors. Secretly, they all shudder before the thought of returning home.⁸⁵

One wonders whether Schalek is reading her own feelings of liberation into the lives of the soldiers. As an adventurous spirit in a very conventional society, and especially as a woman, she was hedged about with myriad restrictions and constraints. Here in the Alpine quarters of the war press corps she was free of Viennese society and its fastidious rules. She recalled her earlier return to Europe after travels abroad:

When I got back to Europe it took me quite a while to adjust once more to the fancy nonsense you have to play out to be fully accepted in society. But hopefully, these constraints won't last much longer.⁸⁶

'The war,' she said 'is americanising'⁸⁷ Austria – one of her more frequent themes in 1915. She believed the masses of ordinary men who had become soldiers were developing as human beings through their front line achievements and the new responsibilities they were forced to bear. She spoke of the 'splendid beings'⁸⁸ she encountered on the front compared to those of Austria's civilians. In her article of 7 September, 'On the Dolomite front,'⁸⁹ she noted that 'In the city there were only inconsequential, petty, selfish people, colourless and complaining.'⁹⁰ As for the soldiers:

Call it love for the Fatherland, call it hatred of the enemy, sport, adventure, the delight of strength: I call it liberated humanity.⁹¹

Nevertheless Schalek also mentioned here, for the first time, the 'horror and distress'⁹² of the war zone, though she justified it in terms of the personal growth and 'fever of experience'⁹³ it offered the individual soldier. It is noteworthy that the expression 'horror and distress' (*Greuel und Nöte*) escaped the censor's scissors. But Schalek was a sophisticated writer and a master of long, contorted Germanic sentences that weave together a number of diverse themes in one grammatical unit. Many of her future reports contain this same bizarre device: a clear revelation of the stench and terrors of the front, seamlessly interwoven with patriotic and propagandist themes. A censor would have a headache trying to extricate one from the other. Without wanting to speculate whether this was a deliberately chosen device to slip the truth through the propaganda filter, or

⁸⁵ Schalek: Tirol als Festung, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 3-4.

⁸⁶ Schalek, Alice: Kriegsbilder aus Tirol. An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 4.

⁸⁷ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

⁸⁸ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

⁸⁹ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

⁹⁰ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

⁹¹ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 5.

⁹² Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 4.

⁹³ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 4.

whether she simply happened to write this way, it is certainly the case that her readers would, as the war progressed, get more from her than a bland account of patriotic heroism.

But in by far the greater part of her reporting from Tyrol the realities and brutalities of war are utterly remote. A further theme of her Tyrol reports is that of the war as a great artistic display. She described riflemen as ‘Defregger⁹⁴ paintings;’ artillery duels as ‘performances that no artist’s skill could depict with more passion and excitement.’⁹⁵

Finally, she returned to her theme of the unworthy Italian. As a privileged member of the War Press Office she was quartered in a sequestered hotel at Karerpass. It happened to be the same hotel she and her friends had arrived at years before, while on a mountain climbing expedition on the Marmolata. Its owners were Italian speakers, making the hotel, in her words, an ‘Italian colony.’ She described the reception she and her friends had been given:

Since we not only looked shabby ... but also spoke German, they stuck us in a room in the basement and gave us sub-standard table service.⁹⁶

Full of satisfaction, she noted that, now, the ‘Latin hoteliers’ had disappeared and the ‘true masters’ were resident ‘in their own house.’⁹⁷ She had a luxurious room to herself, with a magnificent view.

Through her later experiences on the bloody Isonzo front she would develop a more sympathetic outlook towards the Italian people, if not towards their leaders. For now, however, her writing was informed by anger at Italy’s betrayal, and prejudice toward Italians – characteristics most likely shared widely by her readers.

At the end of this first assignment, Schalek produced a book, *Tirol in Waffen*, (Tyrol to arms) that included the newspaper articles referred to above, supplemented by a further three. It appeared in December 1915 and sold moderately well – some 7000 copies by autumn 1916.⁹⁸ Her own newspaper reviewed it in glowing terms. The (anonymous) reviewer praised her ‘superb war reports from the Tyrolean front.’ The reviewer spoke of her ‘picturesque art of expression’ and maintained that Schalek’s reports would succeed in ‘bringing the remote events of the war nearer to those on the home front, and waking in them an understanding and an ability to grasp what is happening.’⁹⁹ True to the theme of war as sport, the writer believed the book should

⁹⁴ Franz von Defregger (1835-1921) was an Austrian painter well known for his somewhat idealised canvas depictions of earlier wars in Tyrol.

⁹⁵ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

⁹⁶ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 2.

⁹⁷ Schalek: An der Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 2.

⁹⁸ Cf. ÖSA, KA: Nachlass Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Maximilian von Hoen, 22. September 1916.

⁹⁹ Anon: NFP, 19. December 1915 (MB), p. 18.

stand in the bookcase of every Tyrolean Alps hiker, right there between the city guides and the Tyrol travel books that have been brought back from this or that holiday.¹⁰⁰

The Swiss newspaper *Täglicher Allgemeiner Anzeiger* gave a more critical appraisal:

The author writes easily, and her reports in the *Neue Freie Presse* have found a big following. Here and there she drifts away from reality, and then gets derailed by her pretty words, that do not fit the seriousness of the topic.¹⁰¹

It is a fair criticism. Whether through pressure from the War Press Office or out of her own imagination, the picture she conveyed was of war as harmless, a great adventure, and a means of making better men – almost ideal human beings. In its most extreme expression, it was like being in a fantastic, oversized play or on a glorious extended holiday. In one of the most extraordinary passages in the book she describes the new phenomenon of an air raid:

Until recently, when I was safely at home and followed the war as a newspaper reader, I felt indignation rising in me when I read about aircraft strafing [soldiers]. I felt it to be the most hideous form of murder to equip an aircraft with the means of annihilation. But it would be a sentimental lie if I were to deny that now, when I look on, it's the most exciting, passionate hunt, and we follow it passionately, breathlessly. We're so much under the spell of the moment that we completely forget the danger we find ourselves in, here under the sweeping arc of the aeroplane.¹⁰²

In view of the dramatic adjustment she had to go through in later months, when she did come under attack and was living continuously in the firing line, we have to assume this is a second or third hand account. It accords well with the mood in her article 'Tyrol as a fortress,' published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 21 August:

So this is the Tyrolean war: a holiday mood everywhere. It's as if an endless Sunday lies over the land.¹⁰³

On a section of what was one of the quietest fronts in the war, during an uneventful week in summer with nothing to do but keep watch on an inactive enemy, the scene may well have felt like a Sunday picnic. Schalek may have been reporting exactly what she saw. But, assuming she had some idea of Austria-Hungary's catastrophic losses in the first year of the war, assuming she knew something of the trauma of an air raid, and assuming she knew at least a little of the stresses on troops closest to the front in any war zone at the best of times, it is difficult to regard such comments as credible reporting.

¹⁰⁰ Anon: NFP, 19. December 1915 (MB), p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: *Täglicher Allgemeiner Anzeiger*, undated.

¹⁰² Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 89.

¹⁰³ Schalek: *Tirol als Festung*, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 3.

The articles in her book elaborated on yet another of her (at this time) favourite themes: the incompetent Italians:

One of the main causes of the Italian failure is that our former allies have no inner concept of war, because their Fatherland has never been invaded.¹⁰⁴

Strictly speaking that was correct, since the Republic of Italy had only existed for a few decades, and previous French and Austrian invasions of Italian land had not been against a single 'Fatherland.' But Italians certainly did have memories of local invasion and battles on their doorstep. The mention of Italian 'failure' probably refers to the fact that Austria-Hungary had decided to fight a purely defensive war along the Italian front, and that Italy's two attempts to break through the Isonzo line, further east, had been unsuccessful. Schalek continued her critique of the Italians by quoting from an Austro-Hungarian officer who had allegedly taken her to an exposed part of the front:

So, now the Italians can see you from all their positions. Now they can do what they always like... I'm convinced, when the Italians see a woman, they won't shoot her. We know the Eyeties¹⁰⁵ well – they know it's got nothing to do with the military when a woman's present. So it's not worth the trouble [to shoot her]. They won't let themselves forget how much a bullet costs.¹⁰⁶

Schalek offered her own reflections on this opinion, tinged with feminist ire:

So, now I have it on good authority that we women aren't worth a shot of gunpowder in this war!¹⁰⁷

Cleverly, she put the insult into the mouths of the Italians – as if goading her Austrian readers to disagree with it.

Continuing her scorn of Italians, Schalek reported the comments of an officer escorting a group of war correspondents to the forward positions:

Our riflemen have scarcely fired their first salvo when the [Italian] captain cries, 'Avanti!' and they turn and run. Our troops stop shooting for a moment – they're laughing so much. We just can't get used to the fact that in Italian the commands for forwards and backwards are the same word, Avanti. Every day brings an incident that strengthens both the courage of our troops and their disrespect for the enemy.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁵ The German word is *Katzelmacher*. This was a derogatory term for Italians during the First World War and between the wars. Although it had no direct sexual connotations, it highlighted the extreme playfulness of Italians and, by implication, their alleged extraordinary interest in sexual activity.

¹⁰⁶ Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 82-83.

The value of such a report could only be to feed the propaganda machine. Yet it is difficult to imagine an educated Viennese taking it seriously. In fact, Austrians became adept, early in the war, at spotting propaganda. As Phillip Knightly explains in his history of war reporting,¹⁰⁹ one of the great failures of the Austrian propaganda machine was that it gave the people so little reliable information that rumour and counter-rumour abounded. Maureen Healy¹¹⁰ tracks the way this led to factions and suspicions, contributing to a gradual breakdown of order in Austrian society.

Schalek saw in the Italian newspapers – presumably taken from captured soldiers – further evidence of their army’s weakness. She maintained that

Cadorna had been falsely informed by his own people, and the captured soldiers tell us again and again how much the soldiers fighting on the front are losing their faith in their leadership.¹¹¹

It is well attested that Cadorna was a ruthless military leader who paid scant attention to the needs of his troops. His relentless campaigns to break the Isonzo line (see later) cost his armies dearly, when there were other military options he could probably have pursued more fruitfully. He was, however, under pressure from the Entente to keep attacking the Austro-Hungarians so as to tie up as many of their divisions as possible and prevent them reinforcing the Central Powers’ armies on the eastern and western fronts.¹¹²

To Schalek, however, the Italians deserved every criticism, insult and punishment for their betrayal of Austria-Hungary in declaring war. Echoing the mood of many of her people, she concluded, ‘I can think of no previous war that was fought with such passionate satisfaction.’¹¹³

Schalek’s reports from her first assignment give very little information about the realities of war or the life of the front line soldier. They echo the propaganda themes of the incompetent and morally reprehensible Italians, the splendid condition and organisation of the Austro-Hungarian army, and the fine form of its fighting men. They show Schalek’s personal fascination with the war zone as a showplace, a kind of grand theatre, together with her excitement at being set free from the routines and conventions of Viennese life and her imputation of this to the soldiers, now ‘liberated’ from stuffy civilian life. At only one point does she note the ugliness of the war. Yet, as her time with the War Press Office continued, this theme would surface more and more. As the war dragged on and its bloodletting became more vicious, widespread and persistent, reality, for Schalek, began to sink in. But first she had to experience the gloom and grey of her next assignment, the conquered and subdued land of Serbia.

¹⁰⁹ Knightly, 1975.

¹¹⁰ Healy, 2004.

¹¹¹ Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 93-94.

¹¹² See discussion in Keegan, 1999, pp. 246 ff.

¹¹³ Schalek: *Tirol in Waffen*, p. 94. The word we have rendered ‘passionate satisfaction’ is *Schadenfreude*.

Chapter Four: On such a winter's day: Serbia and Montenegro

On 17 October 1915 the *Neue Freie Presse* reported that Alice Schalek had taken 'a few weeks holiday' and was now covering 'the southern theatre of war'¹¹⁴ – the Balkan lands of Serbia and Montenegro.

During her holiday there had been a dramatic turn of events in the Balkans. On 5 October a combined force of German and Austro-Hungarian armies invaded Serbia from the north, while their Bulgarian allies invaded a few days later from the east. On 9 October Austro-Hungarian troops entered Belgrade. The Central Powers had laid a careful plan to corner the Serbian army in a giant pincer movement and destroy it.

The Serbs were hopelessly outnumbered but made good use of their familiar mountainous terrain to evade the trap and beat an orderly retreat towards the brother-Serb principality of Montenegro, then to Albania and to the sea. Again the aged King Peter was in their midst as a fellow soldier, marching in the centre of the columns struggling through the mountains in the onset of winter. In a fitting tribute, the troops carried their wounded, enfeebled army chief, Voivode Putnik, in a closed sedan chair. John Keegan comments:

Only an army of natural mountaineers could have survived the passage through Montenegro, and many did not, dying of disease, starvation or cold as they fell out of line by the wayside. Of the 200,000 who had set out, no less than 140,000 survived to cross in early December the frontier of Albania ...¹¹⁵

Albania had been independent since 1913 and had remained neutral. The remnants of the Serbian army reached its Adriatic ports and were taken by ships of the Entente to Corfu, accompanied by thousands of miserable Austro-Hungarian prisoners. The Bulgarian army then turned south to blunt a French and British attempt to relieve pressure on the Serbs in Macedonia.

Schalek began her Balkan assignment with a visit to occupied Belgrade. In her first report, 'The Storming of Belgrade,' published on 21 October, she professed to give a detailed account of the capture of the city but confessed her information was 'second hand,' as:

the defeated army had withdrawn, and with it the civilian population, and close on its heels were the combined armies [of Germany and Austria-Hungary] in pursuit.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Anon.: NFP, 15. October 1915 (AB), p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Keegan, 1999, p. 273.

¹¹⁶ Schalek: Die Erstürmung von Belgrad, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

It was therefore difficult, she said, to get a consistent version of the conquest. There were occupation troops and a few Serbian civilians left behind, so that:

After wandering through the zones where the fighting had taken place, looking round and beginning to grasp how the events had unfolded, I was able to give the following account, which at the very least can make some claim to probability.¹¹⁷

Her account, then, would be from second-hand sources. She begins:

It seems certain that the Serbs were completely surprised by the onslaught of the combined armies ... besides, they don't seem to have considered that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy would ever mount an offensive against them.¹¹⁸

It was the Germans, in fact, who had been the punch and mastermind of the invasion of Serbia. Austro-Hungarian troops had played the major role in taking Belgrade, but again with much German support. Schalek digresses to outline a series of Serb weaknesses that, she maintains, had laid the foundation of Serbia's defeat. She denigrates the Serbs for what she sees as their unrealistic attitude:

Even before the war the Serbs were disparaging of us. After the war began, their overestimate of their own abilities blazed like a raging fire.¹¹⁹

Her gloating here is misplaced but understandable. The small, industrially backward state of Serbia had held the grand armies of the Austro-Hungarian empire at bay for over a year, and given them a bloody nose twice. If the Serbs were not puffed up with pride at their achievement, the Austrians would certainly have felt humbled by it. But now it is Austria's turn to show who is superior. Schalek rubs salt in the wound with a broadside at Serbia's inflated sense of its level of culture:

Now, when out of awful necessity you wander through Belgrade's confused network of streets, and stand before the empty buildings as a prejudice-free observer, before this artless imitation of a fifth-class central-European provincial town, an inexpressible sense of amazement rises in you as to how enormous the power of words is: how was it possible to convince the inhabitants of this dull, unimaginative, gauche city, that lacks any originality or flare, that they could bring culture to the nation that built St Stephens Cathedral?¹²⁰

Schalek was of course anything but a 'prejudice-free observer.' It was her job as an officially accredited war correspondent to foster enthusiasm for the war. But her arguments would have a hollow ring for any reader who thought for a moment about the

¹¹⁷ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹¹⁸ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹¹⁹ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹²⁰ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1. St Stephens, Vienna's cathedral, was an architectural triumph for the Viennese. It was severely damaged in a battle between Russian and Axis troops toward the end of the Second World War. Its restoration did not bring it up to its former glory, and so Schalek's point may be lost on today's readers who have seen it only in its present state.

plain fact that ‘the nation that built St Stephens’ had failed twice to conquer this tiny Balkan land – and only succeeded under German direction with massive help from both Germany and Bulgaria. It was this kind of obvious attempt to mislead the public that brought about a loss of faith in official information and a preoccupation with rumour and intrigue.

Schalek goes on to claim that the people of Belgrade had been certain they could defend their city and, refusing to consider even the possibility of defeat, they ‘hurled abuse at the Monarchy in wild hatred, but even more against Germany.’¹²¹

A further reason for their defeat, she says, was the distracting influence of French military observers:

Shortly before the invasion a new and special moment came to Belgrade, freshening up the mood of the city: droves of French and English officers arrived, and before long every Frenchman had chosen a lover from the beautiful, noble Serbian women – the Englishmen weren’t so much the centre of interest. Apparently there were stirring, passionate love poems that moved the leading ladies of the town to a cheerful-hearted mood and made them blind and deaf to the threatening danger.¹²²

A further reason for Serb defeat, says Schalek, was the military superiority of the Austro-Hungarian army. She begins with the artillery:

Our artillery barrages were implemented from every side, with guns of the biggest calibre. They hit their targets with such fabulous precision that, for example, when they shelled the headquarters of the Kalimegdan¹²³, the entire magazine of every volley hit its target precisely, and every window was blown out.¹²⁴

A reader with even minimal knowledge of artillery would wonder whether she was making this story up – or trying to tell a subtle joke. High explosive shells do not have to be accurate to blow windows out. If the building was sufficiently intact for her to see that ‘every window’ was blown out, very few shells must have hit their target ‘precisely.’ Again, a critical reader would be suspicious.

Next there followed the theme of the courageous Austro-Hungarian soldier in establishing a bridgehead across the Danube. A ‘handful’ of soldiers crossed the Danube under fire. They

¹²¹ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹²² Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹²³ The Kalimegdan was the Turkish-built Fort at the confluence of the Danube and the Save rivers

¹²⁴ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 2.

pressed relentlessly forward and were able to construct ten further trenches, with connecting channels, and when the second squadron set out in the night they were able to advance a good way forward using the cover that had been prepared.¹²⁵

This act of heroism, though, was trumped by that of the artillery, in an action presumably designed to draw fire away from the advancing troops:

The spotters showed a bravery in this fight that here, in a time of the highest achievements, was praised as exceptional. As they got moving behind a fake position they deliberately drew fire upon themselves.

Schalek's first article from Belgrade is propagandist through and through. It disparages the enemy as overconfident, culturally inferior, arrogant, and distracted with carousing, while it paints her own forces as technically precise, methodical and heroic, and downplays the role of their allies.

The brief section of this article dealing with the actual battle for Belgrade is one of the few sections of Schalek's writings that attempt to give an overview of a military action, with a few relevant details, using second-hand sources. It lacks the vivid immediacy of many of her later reports, most of which come from inside the battle zone and describe the localised conditions she actually experienced, in detail, rather than attempting to give an overall perspective on the progress of a battle from the 'outside.' Schalek's male colleagues in the War Press Office tended to move in the opposite direction. Many of their reports were embellished renderings of official press bulletins given out by military commanders. Some correspondents, such as Schalek's colleague Alexander Friedrich Rosenfeld (pen-name 'Roda Roda'), at times even wrote themselves into the battles.¹²⁶ Schalek, however, would develop her own unique style of war reporting in which she shared her personal impressions, both emotional and ideological, of the scene she witnessed at the front line.

Her second Belgrade article appeared on 23 October and begins with a type of observation that was, for her, radically new:

It's astonishing how insensitive and callous this year of war has made human souls... The last months have blunted us to everything that is not visible right before our eyes. The world has got used to reading of a thousand deaths in one sentence, then to going to dinner and then sleeping peacefully. The only thing that touches us is the individual suffering that we see with our own eyes.¹²⁷

What was this 'individual suffering' that Schalek had seen with her own eyes? There was widespread devastation in Belgrade. The city had been fought over, won and lost five times since the start of the war. Austro-Hungarian armies had shelled it repeatedly, both

¹²⁵ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. October 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹²⁶ See, for example, Roda Roda, 'Tale of a Hungarian Hussar: Brush with the Cossacks' in *The Times* London, 10 April 1915.

¹²⁷ Schalek, Alice: Stadt und Festung Belgrad nach der Einnahme, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 1.

during and between battles. For Schalek this was a very different picture from the idyllic scenes behind the lines in the majestic hills of Tyrol.

Nevertheless, she maintained that suffering had come upon the city ‘through its own fault.’ Again she justified the Central Powers’ invasion by highlighting the apparent cultureless features of the city:

For hours I amble through the city and at first I can’t grasp that fact that Serbia’s capital city can look like this. The city and its people are hundreds of years old, but where are the emblems of its embedded art, the defence of which, indeed the liberation of which from oppression, were depicted in the battle-cry of the Serbs?¹²⁸

Hence, to Schalek, it was no great shame that such an artless city had been devastated. Nothing of lasting worth had been destroyed, and nothing more than ‘bricks, mortar and plaster’¹²⁹ would be required to restore it to its former state.

The king’s palace, with ‘all its windows smashed’ made a ‘totally original sight.’¹³⁰ Here was a further example of Serbian cultural inferiority:

In peacetime this building could have been the ornately decorated home of one of the richest of the pig-breeders. King Milan himself, who had this castle built and who certainly lived an unusual life, had no uniquely Slavic art incorporated into it.¹³¹

Schalek asked, therefore, why Serbia had been worth supporting by the Entente to the extent that a world war had been ignited:

What a pity that Mr Grey¹³² never came to visit here in peacetime, and that Messers Poincare and d’Annuncio never had a rendezvous here. Perhaps then the motto of proud, saintly Serbianism, that has set the weapons of the whole world against ‘German barbarism’ would never have been spread abroad.¹³³

In a rather nasty note of sarcasm Schalek concludes that if Grey had visited Belgrade,

The Serbs would have spruced up their buildings and begun to pursue a responsible foreign policy.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ Schalek: *Stadt und Festung*, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹²⁹ Schalek: *Stadt und Festung*, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹³⁰ Schalek: *Stadt und Festung*, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹³¹ Schalek: *Stadt und Festung*, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), s. 3.

¹³² Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933) was the British Foreign Secretary. Raymond Poincare (1860-1934) was the French President. Gabriele d’Annuncio (1863-38) was an Italian writer, bomber pilot and politician who supported the Irredenta and pressed for Italy to enter the war throughout 1914-15.

¹³³ Schalek: *Stadt und Festung*, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), s. 3.

¹³⁴ Schalek: *Stadt und Festung*, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 3.

For the Austro-Hungarians a ‘responsible foreign policy’ on the part of Serbia would have been to surrender Serbian sovereignty and any desire to support Serbs within the empire who were agitating for self-determination. Yet the empire was facing separatist movements and sympathies on many fronts, and had long been drifting towards break-up. In some respects Austria-Hungary’s attempt to control Serbia was the last gasp of a dying regime. There is a deeply conservative spirit in Schalek’s writings, a longing to see Austria-Hungary hold together and prosper in its traditional form.

Schalek then describes her encounters with some of the Serbian women remaining in the city. To her surprise they greeted her cheerfully. She reflects:

So every possibility on the spectrum of human feeling is conceivable today, even laughter, for which Belgrade, shot to pieces, hardly offers an opportunity.¹³⁵

She found at least one reason for their laughter, however, when a translator told her what the women were saying:

‘Do your shooting and your blowing up and make yourselves at home. Our people will come back cheering and drive you out. France will stand by us.’¹³⁶

But Schalek believed the occupation of Serbia was permanent and its independence was gone forever. She felt sorry for these women who, she thought, would eventually have to accept their country’s defeat. They would experience:

The slow erosion of confidence, the slow fading of trust, and the sudden breaking in of the certainty of their nation’s end – in a word, a rude awakening.¹³⁷

Ironically, this was exactly what was happening to her own land. There had already been food riots in Vienna; factions were hardening and there was open conflict between interest groups in the German speaking part of the empire; the Austro-Hungarian army was functioning as merely a poor wing of the German military machine, and Germany was now dictating the course of the war. The Entente was already discussing how the Austro-Hungarian Empire would be carved up when the fighting was over. Nevertheless, Schalek could identify with these Serbian women in what she saw as their helplessness, as women who could do nothing but look on while their men did the fighting.

Finally, Schalek returned to the somewhat critical theme with which she had begun her article:

This is war. That’s the great excuse for standing on a million graves and thinking only of ‘life as usual.’¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Schalek: Stadt und Festung, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 3-4.

¹³⁶ Schalek: Stadt und Festung, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 4.

¹³⁷ Schalek: Stadt und Festung, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 4.

¹³⁸ Schalek: Stadt und Festung, NFP, 23. October 1915 (MB), p. 4.

Schalek's Belgrade articles stand in contrast to the holiday atmosphere of her reports from the Tyrolean Alps. She has now seen some of the destruction of war first hand, and reflected on its effect on at least some of its victims. As if to excuse this, she is now forced to find justifications for the war, and her belief in Austria's cultural superiority enables her to do this. A few weeks later, as she moved to the Montenegrin border and closer to the fighting troops, she would begin to see how the destruction of war was impinging on her own country's soldiers.

From 25 October to 8 November 1915 Schalek stayed in the border area of Serbia and Montenegro and visited Sarajevo, Mostar, Avtovac, Stepen, Bilek, Lastua, Trebinje, Cattaro, Ragusa, Spalato, Knin und Fiume.¹³⁹ She appears to have had significant contact with combat troops and was in some danger at times – though nothing like what would confront her on the Isonzo. Her first report was printed in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 14 November. Again it is laced with justifications for this particular phase of the war. In this case, she said, Montenegrin King Nikita had been wooed by Russian money. He had

... suddenly discovered unbridled Serbian nationalist feelings in himself when the Russian ruble started rolling in with such heart-refreshing persistence. All of a sudden he found himself unable to stand by and ignore the oppression of his Slavic brothers.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Schalek saw Nikita as a more formidable enemy than King Peter, more in touch with his people and better able to motivate them:

He knows they won't fight for the ideals that roused the Serbs – freedom, a southern Serb realm, the lure of becoming a great power – but to allay their hunger and retain their land.¹⁴¹

From the moment the Montenegrins were attacked they had their backs to the wall and were fighting for their lives. It would be a 'grave mistake,' said Schalek, 'to underestimate this enemy.'¹⁴²

Schalek then reports on the difficulties the Austro-Hungarian soldiers are facing in Montenegro: the climate, the terrain, the land surface, and the desperate enemy:

The main enemy in Avtovac is not the Montenegrin, but actually the climate and the terrain. These are the most powerful allies of the enemy and he makes good use of them. Whoever sees this terrain will grasp that Montenegro can defend itself against a whole army with just a few men.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Cf.: ÖSA, KA: Nachlass Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Lebenslauf von Alice Schalek.

¹⁴⁰ Schalek, Alice: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴¹ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴² Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴³ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

Compared to the summer glory of Tyrol, late winter in Montenegro inspired gloom and pessimism. The view of the landscape, said Schalek

stirred neither lust for adventure nor the passion of sport. Our soldiers have nothing to spur them on but duty and the will to win.¹⁴⁴

The mood of the Habsburg army in Montenegro was far removed from the spit and polish of that in Tyrol. Ignoring the obvious fact that this was largely because it had fought its way through Serbia against a determined enemy, after two earlier crushing defeats, all of which had taken a heavy toll, Schalek rather quaintly attributed it to the view of the landscape:

I can now measure how much the cheerful bravado of our Tyrol army is bound up with the magnificent backdrop that decorates that theatre of war – now that I see the landscape in Avtovac, drawn grey in grey, not with an artist's pencil, but with an ink well and chalk, in blurred lines, friendless, colourless and dull.¹⁴⁵

Perhaps she was imputing the reasons for her own mood to the soldiers. Or perhaps she felt duty-bound to provide a neutral explanation for discontent within an army whose morale was flagging. In any case, she turns now to a more convincing reason for gloom: the fierceness of the enemy:

He creeps up in the night. His white sheepskin makes him as invisible as does his black coat. He throws his bombs or his hand grenades into our position, runs away like a cat, and if a bullet from our machineguns hits him it's purely accidental.¹⁴⁶

In contrast to the Austro-Hungarian army, which Schalek describes as 'courageous yet careful; passionate yet cautious; poetic, theatrical and honest, but nevertheless resourceful,'¹⁴⁷ the Montenegrins

massacre our wounded, as several finds of bodies have confirmed... Every man in the land has a rifle, that he knows well and loves. He often shoots just to keep his hands warm.¹⁴⁸

Montenegrin women also took part in the fighting. Schalek saw this as grounds for respect, and described the Montenegrin women as 'the binding force between war and home.'¹⁴⁹ If men were in short supply on the battlefield, a woman would stand 'in his place, ... with a rifle, at her post.'¹⁵⁰ Schalek appreciated and supported this characteristic of Montenegrin women. In her own life she had constantly ventured into domains

¹⁴⁴ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Schalek: Tirol in Waffen, p. 52.

¹⁴⁸ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 3.

traditionally reserved for men, including her present one as a war correspondent. She could no doubt identify with the Montenegrin women soldiers.

Schalek then appealed to Austrian readers to make an effort to understand what the empire's troops were going through. This theme would become frequent in her war articles:

You back home who sit at the genial tea table: think of your brothers at the Montenegrin front. Think, that out there men stand in the middle of nowhere, men of the western nations, in hand to hand combat with the men of the eastern mountains.¹⁵¹

Schalek's second report appeared four weeks later, on 11 December. By the time the article was published, Austria-Hungary had succeeded in occupying Montenegro. But fighting was still going on while she was gathering her material. To begin with, the road she journeyed on from Avtovac via Stepen to Bilek was 'under enemy fire from time to time.'¹⁵² It was the nearest yet that she had been to fighting, and gave her the opportunity to compare the characteristics of the opposing armies – quite likely from the comments of front line troops.

Again Schalek found the landscape comfortless, 'like the end of the world,'¹⁵³ and believed it served to wear out the soldiers and diminish their strength. They also had the unorthodox tactics of their enemies to contend with:

They complain that this is not a chivalrous war that they have to fight, rather that the guerrilla form of combat, which the wretchedness of the landscapes makes even more deadening, robs their war of any sense and value.¹⁵⁴

Convinced that the civilian public had not the faintest idea what life was really like for troops in battle, Schalek felt the soldiers on each side of the front line had a much better feeling for each other's predicament:

While his brother at home only experiences the end result of our descriptions of the battlefield, he himself feels closer to the enemy, who suffers the same secret conflicts, leads the same life.¹⁵⁵

She takes this one step further, reporting that the Austro-Hungarian officers accepted that, from the Montenegrin point of view, their soldiers had valid reasons to be fighting:

¹⁵¹ Schalek: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁵² Schalek, Alice: An der montenegrinischen Grenze. Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. Dezember 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹⁵³ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

Here on the front I don't feel the slightest trace of that wild hatred against the enemy that the Latins, above all, fill their newspapers with. The officer here regards our cause as just and sees our victory as absolutely necessary for the continuance of the Fatherland. Perhaps he also regards our forces as the more capable. But under all circumstances he reckons with the fact that the enemy has its own subjective opinion – and takes it into account.¹⁵⁶

In one sense this could reveal a shade of doubt as to the rightness of Austria-Hungary's invasion of Montenegro: the Montenegrins also have an opinion on the matter, even though it is merely 'subjective.' At the same time, however, it paints her own side's officer in a morally good light, as he has the broadness of mind to be able to look at things even from his enemy's point of view. That the enemy is wrong is confirmed by its morally repugnant behaviour, to which she now turns. For Montenegrins, she says with some sarcasm, the war has brought out the 'best' in them, which means

nothing other than a continuance of their favourite way of life: in bivouacs, sentry posts, creeping round at night. Their greatest passion is everything that makes for an adventure in the art of achieving nothing.¹⁵⁷

For the Austro-Hungarian soldier, by contrast, the war is a more positive kind of adventure, as a result of which 'our men at the front will return home with a new outlook.'¹⁵⁸ For soldiers on both sides, though, war was an 'adventure.' This theme would persist in her writings until her time with troops in the trenches on the Isonzo.

She then makes a series of further attempts to bring home to her readers the everyday discomforts and stresses of the soldier's life at the front line. There is, for example, life in trenches and dugouts:

They should construct one of these earth-homes in the Imperial Museum, right beside a priceless Titian [painting], and every schoolbook should in future give instructions on how to build one.¹⁵⁹

But even 'earth-homes' cannot fully protect the soldiers. The ugly reality of their lives is revealed in this next passage:

Pain burns in me that our doctors, our technicians, our factory workers and sales-people, our artists and scholars, are housed here in the earth and have to spill their blood; that month after month they spend every minute of their mental powers, motionless, on the lookout for the slightest stirring ... and all because Nikita got money from Russia.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ Schalek: Von Avtovac nach Stepen, NFP, 11. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

This is an extraordinary departure from typical First World War front line reporting. The war is a waste of men's time, skills and intellect, drawing them away from productive occupations to sit for months on end in trenches, spilling their blood along the way. The cause of this waste, she says, is Nikita, the Montenegrin king who declared war on Austria-Hungary out of greed for Russian money. But this is tacked on at the end, in the form of an afterthought, and any intelligent reader would see it had the over-simplistic nature of standard War Press Office propaganda. What is noteworthy is that a war correspondent was beginning to succeed in having clear expressions published of the blood and human waste the war was bringing to her own country's young men.

Her next article continues in this vein, where she expresses

... deep pity for those torn from their jobs, their homes, their everyday lives, to have to grapple with half-wild primeval forest heroes.¹⁶¹

Again the cause of the disruption is tacked on at the end, again in the simplistic, one-sided form of standard propaganda. But she stays with the subject, this time attaching it to a critique of the impatience of civilians on the home front:

Whoever has seen these Balkan mountains, the Brdos and the Brhs, and has any idea what an attack and an advance and a battle means in these rocks where every shrapnel shell blasts out not only its own fragments [but also fragments of rock], such a person would never again cast a newspaper aside impatiently in a coffeehouse when it fails to report any new conquests in the southeast.¹⁶²

She continues the point, this time linking it to an appeal for more respect for the troops:

When the war report from our Montenegrin front says 'The situation is unchanged,' even then all those at home should thank the troops with awe; the troops who fight between rocks and against rocks, who defend rocks and conquer rocks.¹⁶³

Schalek has begun to bring something of the true picture of the war's ugliness to her readers. Certainly, these flashes of reality are hedged around with standard propaganda themes. Even in this third article from Montenegro, she trumpets yet more such themes: a side-swipe at France,¹⁶⁴ an example of the self-sacrificial patriotism of a sergeant,¹⁶⁵ a statement of Austria-Hungary's willingness to share the Adriatic with other nations.¹⁶⁶ But she is clearly edging beyond the propaganda. Her dominant style of war reporting is beginning to take shape. Instead of merely embellishing and passing on official battle reports, she lets her thoughts and her feelings run free and shapes these into narratives for

¹⁶¹ Schalek, Alice: An der montenegrinischen Grenze. Von Bilek nach Lastua, NFP, 15. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁶² Schalek: Bilek, NFP, 15. December 1915 (MB), p. 4.

¹⁶³ Schalek: Bilek, NFP, 15. December 1915 (MB), p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ Schalek: Bilek, NFP, 15. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁶⁵ Schalek: Bilek, NFP, 15. December 1915 (MB), p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Schalek: Bilek, NFP, 15. December 1915 (MB), p. 1.

her readers. At times they are fully compatible with the patriotic themes that the War Surveillance Unit expected of the War Press Office. At times they seem too close to the truth to fit this brief. In every case these sentiments are anchored, in her reports, either grammatically or thematically or both, to a standard propaganda theme. Presumably this is how they escaped the censor. As the war progressed she would continue with this style, and broaden it somewhat. At this point one might wonder whether it was a deliberate ploy, or merely the random thoughts of a patriotic travel journalist thinking out loud in a battle zone.

Chapter Five: ‘How I do like to be beside the seaside’: The naval outpost of Cattaro

On the coast of Montenegro, nestled beneath rugged, imposing black hills that rise almost vertically out of the sea, lies the ancient port of Kator. This tiny outpost has a deep water harbour and is an ideal base for naval operations. Due to its strategic importance it has been fought over many times since the middle ages. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century it belonged to Venice, though it was frequently besieged by the Turks. In 1797 it passed to the Habsburg Empire. Eight years later it became an Italian outpost, and after another five years it was taken over by the French. Four years later, in 1814, it was restored to Austria-Hungary by the Congress of Vienna.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a naval power, and Kator – called ‘Cattaro’ by the Austrians – was a key port for their access to the Adriatic and for their German allies’ naval operations in the eastern Mediterranean. The people of Cattaro were mostly of Slavic origin, but Austro-Hungarian races had moved into the town during the hundred years of Habsburg rule. Aside from regular troops of the Austro-Hungarian navy and army, Cattaro had its own militia, the Mornarica, a traditional, Christian based military order dating back to the middle ages.

In the early months of 1916 Cattaro was used as a staging point for an Austro-Hungarian land offensive into Montenegro, in an attempt to aid Austria-Hungary’s forces already in Montenegro by squeezing the Montenegrins between the two armies. Later in the war it became the scene of fierce fighting. Throughout 1915, however, it remained relatively peaceful. In December of that year Alice Schalek and her journalist colleagues were taken to this quiet and picturesque outpost on a visit arranged by the War Press Office.

The delegation was given a formal reception by the Mornarica in the form of a parade, in its traditional ceremonial military dress. Schalek’s first article on the visit, published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 23 December, described the ‘glorious costumed guards,’¹⁶⁷ who ‘put on this beautiful parade for us ... to show their enormous joy at receiving visitors from “outside.”’¹⁶⁸ She was pleasantly surprised to be greeted so festively, having expected

to find the city on a total war footing and even shelled and in ruins, as it lay hard on the border and near to the front.¹⁶⁹

The atmosphere, however, was light hearted and peaceful, and the colourful costumes had the effect

¹⁶⁷ Schalek, Alice: An der Montenegrischen Grenze: Ein Idyll, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Schalek: Ein Idyll, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ Schalek: Ein Idyll, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

that the reality of the war faded before my eyes and a wonderful mood came over me.¹⁷⁰

It seemed to her that the members of the Mornarica wanted to use the visit of the war Press Office to publicise and draw attention to their existence and their deeds. The war correspondents were ‘told all the details of the Mornarica’¹⁷¹ and ‘given brochures outlining the history of their ancient order.’¹⁷² She reported that she was impressed with their willingness to offer themselves for the war effort and that ‘every member ... had freely registered as a defender of the Fatherland.’¹⁷³ She commented: ‘After our disconsolate impressions of Stepen and Lastua none of us expected [to get the feeling] of being in the middle ages.’¹⁷⁴

Having turned the reception to a useful piece of propaganda, Schalek then attempted an explanation as to why the Montenegrins had not shelled the city from their bases in the hills surrounding it. Apart from the fact that the Montenegrins were ‘short of ammunition,’¹⁷⁵

[King] Nikita was being careful not to make us even more antagonistic to him by destroying this historic city.¹⁷⁶

This was speculation, either her own or that of her minders. Nikita could have saved his army a good deal of trouble if he had damaged the port and made future landings of Habsburg troops difficult. It parallels a tendency Schalek showed at regular intervals: an aesthetic attachment to beautiful ‘historic’ buildings that often seems to take precedence over the human tragedy of war. She could forgive Nikita for accepting the Russian bribes that, she said, had drawn him into war. But to deface a medieval architectural gem would make the gulf between him and the empire ‘unbridgeable.’¹⁷⁷ This point is significant in interpreting Schalek’s later comments on the bombing of Venice (see below).

Schalek also wrote of impressions she had gained from conversations in Cattaro regarding the war in Montenegro. There were reports, she said, that in Montenegro there had been great ‘reluctance ... to go to war against the empire,’¹⁷⁸ and that there were rumours that ‘there is a strongly pro-Austrian party in the King’s Court, where many German and Austrian newspapers are read.’¹⁷⁹ Presumably this was to imply that these people would know of facts and details that would be hidden from the Montenegrin populace. It would not necessarily be a sign of disloyalty toward Nikita, as she herself often mentioned reading the enemy’s newspapers.

¹⁷⁰ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁷² Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁷³ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁷⁵ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁷⁷ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁷⁸ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁷⁹ Schalek: *Ein Idyll*, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

Finally, she sought to reassure her readers of the flimsiness of the Montenegrin enemy by reporting on rumours of Nikita's personal weaknesses and doubtful motivation:

King Nikita suffers badly from gout and is therefore very tetchy and grumpy. He's prosecuting this war only out of necessity and it gets on his nerves.¹⁸⁰

Her readers were invited to conclude that Nikita himself was not standing fully behind his war effort, and nor were many of his people, so it should not be too difficult to defeat him. As further evidence of his wavering attitude Schalek reported that many in Cattaro

doubted very much whether Nikita would receive the fleeing Serbian army, and even more that he would allow them to cross his border to the Adriatic.¹⁸¹

Her readers, then, may be assured that the grim and bloody conflict in Montenegro, which she earlier reported on with some vividness, would soon be over.

While in Cattaro, Schalek took the opportunity to meet with some of Austria-Hungary's naval personnel. In her second article, published in the *Neue Freie Presse* in January 1916, after her return to Vienna, Schalek reports what she has learned about war at sea and its attendant stresses and dangers.

Once again she couches her report in the context of the courage and commitment of the Austro-Hungarian fighting men, all of whom she sees as heroes. To begin with, these were

very young men, with boys' faces and bright eyes. The officers among them had supple frames and fine hands – elegant people with easy movements and easy words and unobtrusive bearing.¹⁸²

They were adventurers, but of a different sort from the rugged individuals she had met in her world travels – the 'American cowboys, the pioneers of the jungle and of ancient forests, the missionaries in the wilderness.'¹⁸³ There was a fresh simplicity and elegance about the young Austrian fighting men – what one would expect, perhaps, of civilians who had become soldiers and sailors only because of the war. Perhaps there is a subtle suggestion that those on the home front should be able to identify with such men.

Nevertheless, the lives of these men are very different from those at home. Most significantly, they are in the business of killing and being killed:

¹⁸⁰ Schalek: Ein Idyll, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 3.

¹⁸¹ Schalek: Ein Idyll, NFP, 23. December 1915 (MB), p. 4.

¹⁸² Schalek, Alice: Krieg in den Lüften, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁸³ Schalek: Krieg in den Lüften, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 2.

Description will not suffice. We can have no idea what cold-bloodedness is achieved at the moment of a fight to the death.¹⁸⁴ Never in our wildest imagination can we visualise how great the danger is.¹⁸⁵

The word ‘cold-bloodedness’ is our translation of the German *kaltblütigkeit*. Its connotations are not quite as negative as in English, and its meaning can be as weak as ‘emotionless-ness.’ It is unlikely that Schalek is disparaging the sailors as heartless or cruel. The meaning is more a complete lack of the feelings people normally get when in extreme danger or are about to kill another human being. Schalek gives an example of this ‘cold-bloodedness,’ from a sailor’s description of being on the watch on a submarine:

During these four hours we stand on the deck, near the tower. You’re wet through, as water runs in between your jacket and your skin. You never dry out, not even inside. Your eyes burn from wind and saltwater. Goggles are no use: they fog up again and again. With your free hand you have to open and shut the hatch, constantly, so that those inside get air but no water... And what’s more, anyone who peers through a periscope for more than two hours loses his clarity of vision. You do this the whole day long, without seeing anything, without a shot being fired. Then an enemy ship comes into view; you must get to work skilfully, without uttering a word, or the enemy will notice you and blow the whistle on you.¹⁸⁶

Schalek was fascinated by the willingness of these men to put their lives in danger, and from the matter-of-fact way they talked about it. She marvelled:

Don’t each of these men have a life like we others? Do they have a sense of self¹⁸⁷ and yet no fear of death? ‘No,’ they say, ‘how we laughed ...’ Only in Austria is a story of danger and dying told in such way.¹⁸⁸

In fact, stories of danger and dying were being told in that way by soldiers all over Europe – not because the tellers were exceptionally heroic but as a means of coping with the terrors they lived with daily. Humour and objectivity in the face of constant danger were coping mechanisms. Nevertheless, it was becoming clear to her that war was not the brief and exciting romantic interlude she had imagined it to be. She concludes her article:

We went into this war full of sentimentalism. We intended to pursue it with chivalry. Slowly and with painful lessons we’ve let that go. Who among us would not have shuddered at the thought, a year ago, that Venice could be bombed! And now we ask ourselves, with astonishment, how it can be that ninety million Americans mourn the loss of a painting more than the loss of a million human beings.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ This could alternatively be translated: ‘We can have no idea what emotionless-ness is achieved at the instant of the deed.’

¹⁸⁵ Schalek, Alice: *Krieg in den Lüften*, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 2.

¹⁸⁶ Schalek, Alice: *Krieg in den Lüften*, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 4.

¹⁸⁷ ‘a sense of self’ is our rendering of ‘Ichgefühl’

¹⁸⁸ Schalek, Alice: *Krieg in den Lüften*, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 4.

¹⁸⁹ Schalek, Alice: *Krieg in den Lüften*, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 3.

For Schalek, whose emotional attachment to historic buildings we have already mentioned, the bombing of Venice would have been an outrage. As she knew, it was her own country that was dropping the bombs. Between 24 May and 20 November 1915 there were eight Austrian air-raids on Venice.¹⁹⁰ The first came just twelve hours after Italy declared war on Austria.¹⁹¹ The city began to protect its art treasures by encasing them in sandbags.¹⁹² One bomb, on 25 October, narrowly missed St Marks Cathedral.¹⁹³ The Austrians were bombing cities all over the north of Italy, including one raid on Verona, where bombs fell in the busy market of the Piazza delle Erbe, killing or wounding 78 people.¹⁹⁴ Schalek might not have known all these details but she would have read the official Austrian press release of 28 October reporting the raid on Venice on the 24th of that month and pointing out that it was retaliation for an Italian raid on Trieste.¹⁹⁵

Surely the patriotic response of a loyal Austrian journalist would have been to bemoan the raid on Trieste. But to Schalek, the bombing of Venice was the larger crime because of the fabulous cultural and artistic treasures of the city. After all, even the culture-starved Montenegrins had avoided the sacrilege of bombing Cattaro. Her comment is cleverly written so that it could be interpreted either neutrally, as a statement of fact about the values that had to be surrendered in wartime, or as a clear criticism of one of her country's military actions. Given the context of censorship and the total loyalty expected of war correspondents in all the warring nations, it is surprising that this remark was printed in a leading establishment newspaper - perhaps its ambiguity enabled it to slip past the censor. For all her idiosyncrasies and underlying patriotism, Schalek has begun to reveal the seeds of an independence in her reporting – seeds that would grow as she moved to her next assignments.

But the loss of a million human beings is also to be regretted. Presumably the Americans she mentions have protested about the bombing of art treasures but not about the massive loss of human life that has become part and parcel of this war. That bloodletting, she now suggests, is far more monstrous than even the destruction of cultural treasures.

Schalek's visit to Cattaro began as light relief from the grey reality of war. It ended with her being forced to grapple with the grim truth of the conflict that had embraced Europe and from which there was no escape. Millions were dying. Elegant young men in the prime of life were being made into 'cold-blooded' (or at least 'emotion-less') hunter-killers. Her own country was dropping destruction on one of the world's greatest art treasures. The glorious summer in the Tyrolean Alps was long past. Schalek's next summer, on the vast and static front of the Isonzo, would bring her right into the midst of the ugliness of the war zone.

¹⁹⁰ 'Another Raid on Venice,' *The Times*, 20 November 1915.

¹⁹¹ 'Air raid on Venice: Austrian Attack Repulsed.' *The Times*, 25 May 1915.

¹⁹² 'Venice Under Sandbags,' *The Times*, 2 November 1915.

¹⁹³ 'Bombs on Venice: Little Damage in 3 Air Attacks,' *The Times*, 26 October 1915.

¹⁹⁴ 'Austrian Air Raid on Verona,' *The Times*, 15 November 1915.

¹⁹⁵ Reported in 'Air raid on Venice: Austrian Report,' *The Times*, 28 October 1915.

Chapter Six: Down by the riverside: Schalek's first impressions of the Isonzo Front

The Isonzo River flows south toward the Adriatic from the Julian Alps, running along the Slovenian side of today's Italian-Slovenian border, then southwest into Italy through the town of Gorizia, finally curving around to the southeast and into the Gulf of Trieste. In 1915 the river was on the Austro-Hungarian side of the border between Italy and the Habsburg Empire. Since the rest of the border was in the alpine region of what is now South Tyrol, the Isonzo offered the best prospects for an Italian advance into Austria-Hungary.

But conditions on the Isonzo were far from ideal for an invading army. Apart from the narrow plain at the mouth of the river and extending a few kilometres in the direction of Trieste, there are chains of mountain peaks along most of the Habsburg side of what was then the border, and the Austro-Hungarian armies were quick to secure these when war was declared. The river itself runs through very rugged country. Around Gorizia the terrain is a confusion of hills, ravines, mountain chains, plateaus and steep round knolls that rise up abruptly out of river flats. To make any headway, the Italians would have to attack in full view of entrenched Austro-Hungarian troops who could watch their movements and shell them mercilessly from their elevated positions.

The Italian Chief of Staff, General Luigi Cadorna, was a determined adversary who believed the best way to make war was to attack relentlessly. For over two years he hammered away at the Austro-Hungarian defences, losing over a million men, causing about half that many enemy casualties, and making little progress. He had the bad luck that, just when his exhausted armies had finally broken through into the Plain of Trieste, the Austro-Hungarians were so demoralised that they swallowed their pride and called on the Germans for help. The ensuing route of the Italian forces, in October 1917, is today graphically documented in the little war museum in Kobarid (formerly Carporetto), where the breakthrough occurred. It is also eloquently depicted in Ernest Hemingway's novel, *A farewell to arms*.¹⁹⁶ Though Hemingway was not present at the retreat and never visited the site of the battle, his research produced an excellent account of the conditions and the events, which subsequent research has confirmed.¹⁹⁷

As on most of the stalemated fronts in the First World War, there was continual shooting, shelling, mining and harassment along the Isonzo front even when no major attacks were underway. But Cadorna mounted at least ten massive offensives (some historians say eleven – it depends how you mark their beginnings and endings) to try to break the line. Each time he made either no progress, or a little progress, and each time his traumatised armies had to be replenished with hundreds of thousands of new recruits. His best soldiers were the officer corps he had inherited from the Kingdom of Savoy, which had

¹⁹⁶ First published in the United Kingdom by Jonathan Cape Ltd in 1929.

¹⁹⁷ Reynolds, 1976.

been the leading force in Italy's unification in 1870. It was a patriotic, professional, well educated military elite and the only army in Europe that allowed Jews to rise to high rank. Unfortunately for Cadorna, it was too small to win this war by itself and had to be supplemented by wave after wave of young men who were more often than not poorly educated, weakly motivated and, as time wore on and the body count rose, somewhat bewildered as to why they were being poured out for such a hopeless task.

Cadorna's opponents on the Isonzo were commanded by the Field Marshall Svetozar Boroevic, one of the highest ranking Croatian officers in the Austro-Hungarian forces and arguably its best military commander. Boroevic had taken a leading role in campaigns against the Russians in the first nine months of the war and was now commanding the Fifth Army. Austria-Hungary had no designs on Italian territory and Boroevic made the sensible decision to take a defensive stance and use his hilltop positions to full advantage. Hence, his troops suffered only half the casualties of the persistently attacking Italians, but since the Italians had more reserves to draw on, Boroevic could ill afford these losses.

By March 1916 the first four Isonzo battles had already taken place. Italy had made minor territorial gains and lost 160,000 men to Austria-Hungary's 115,000. Austrian Commander in Chief Conrad was planning a major offensive on the Tyrolean front (it took place in May, lost Austria-Hungary 81,000 soldiers and was stopped by the Italians after a gain of a few kilometres), and Boroevic was concerned he might have to give up some of his battalions for that venture. In a quasi-political manoeuvre, he asked Major-General Ritter von Hoen, commander of the War Press Office, for Alice Schalek to visit the Isonzo front and publicise the efforts of his troops so as to create political pressure for them to be kept there.¹⁹⁸ As a result, Schalek was assigned to the Isonzo front from 15 March to 6 April 1916, from 4 May to 5 June 1916, and again for a few weeks in 1917.

On 11 March, four days before Schalek arrived, Italian commander Cadorna launched a major offensive against Boroevic's army - the 'Fifth Battle of the Isonzo.' The attack continued throughout Schalek's visit.

During her stay Schalek was taken to positions in and around the towns of Gorizia, Biglia, Britof and Kenza, and wrote 19 articles for her newspapers under the series title *Bei der Isonzoarmee* (With the Isonzo Army). At the end of her stay she published these together in a book, *Am Isonzo: März – Juli 1916* (At the Isonzo, March – July 1916). The book appeared in December 1916 but was never reprinted in German. In 1977, however, Italian military historians had it translated in to their language, and this edition has since seen two reprints.¹⁹⁹ This is an indication of the extent to which Schalek's war reporting can be of general interest to those involved in the fronts she visited - despite her persistent Austro-Hungarian patriotism and racial stereotyping.

¹⁹⁸ Cf.: Rapp: 'Das Ganze ist so grandios organisiert...', p. 30.

¹⁹⁹ Schalek, *Isonzofront (Am Isonzo: März bis Juli 1916)*, Rome, Libreria Adamo, 1977. Reprinted 1988 and 2003.

The Austro-Hungarian peoples most immediately threatened by the Italian attempt at invasion were the Slovenians. Schalek rarely mentions Slovenians directly, lumping them together with other south west Slavs under the general heading 'Dalmatian' or the misnomers 'Croatian' or 'Austrian.' Slovenian soldiers made up a sizable proportion of Borojević's army, and are remembered in popular folklore in Slovenia today as exceptionally determined troops who had a strong nationalistic motivation to keep the Italians out. In 2005 Schalek's *Am Isonzo* was translated into Slovenian.

Schalek's first article (which appeared in the *Neue Freie Presse* a month after her arrival) reported on her initial meeting with Borojević. Despite his reputation as the 'Lion of Isonzo,' she found him both congenial and awe-inspiring.

He doesn't strike you as a commander in chief, especially when he laughs... Anyone can come to Colonel-General von Borojević and freely tell him what he wants. And when I ask him if I may write about his army his eyes light up so radiantly that I almost overcome my fear at this moment and have to smile.²⁰⁰

Borojević gave Schalek his view of the situation at the Isonzo, explained to her how his troops were holding their positions, and asked her to write a full account of the achievements of his soldiers, telling her:

'You must write about every single one of my soldiers... What's happening here in the Isonzo is without parallel in history. The Isonzo is held by the individual man. My own good intentions could achieve nothing if it weren't that the individual stands here, the nameless, simple man. Go to him and see for yourself how he keeps watch.'²⁰¹

He went on to describe the apparently futile attacks of the Italian troops, who believed in 'neither their leadership nor their administration nor their government,'²⁰² and 'nor, above all, in the necessity of their war – which they fight only because they're made to.'²⁰³ He was convinced, on the other hand, that his own troops offered themselves for their Fatherland because it simply had to be defended. 'And each of my men,' he said, 'puts his duty above his life.'²⁰⁴

Schalek added her own note of support for Borojević's concerns. She was very much aware of the loss of interest in the war on the home front, where there was little thought for the sacrifice and achievements of the empire's soldiers. Shortly before her journey to the Isonzo front, she said, she had overheard a woman in a bookshop saying she wanted to hear or read no more about the war. Commenting on this, Schalek responded:

²⁰⁰ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Ankunft im Hauptquartier, NFP, 4. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁰¹ Schalek: Ankunft im Hauptquartier, NFP, 4. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁰² Schalek: Ankunft im Hauptquartier, NFP, 4. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁰³ Schalek: Ankunft im Hauptquartier, NFP, 4. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁰⁴ Schalek: Ankunft im Hauptquartier, NFP, 4. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

No, I don't believe people have heard enough of it. The dreadfully brief words that have been printed for us stand like a wall between us. 'Battle' – what a pale expression! 'Victory' – what an empty summary! Do we know what lies behind these words? Men are dying. Each of these words comprises thousands of fates. Do we value the fact that this war digs its claws into hundreds of thousands of lives, and out of the midst of those who are alive today, tomorrow many are bleeding to death? Shall we stop our ears, so that we can laugh and dream undisturbed? Shall we be allowed to say, 'Please, nothing from the war!?'²⁰⁵

This passage is revealing in that it spells out Schalek's approach to war reporting, in contrast to the bland official reports that were common in the Viennese press and the matter-of-fact style of most male war correspondents. Indeed, when she published her Isonzo articles in book form she put these comments on the very first page, making it clear that her purpose in writing was to put the truth of the blood-letting before a mass audience. Motivated by a mixture of patriotism and a growing empathy with the front line soldier, she sets out to press the human side of the war upon her readers. A central part of this is the immense pit of suffering and horror the ordinary soldier was required to wallow in. Ironically, this was not always the sort of news the War Press Office would have wanted in the daily newspapers. Yet how could she publicise the extraordinary courage and sacrifice of the soldiers (as Borojevic requested her to), if she did not reveal what the horrors were that demanded such courage and sacrifice of these men? In a sense Schalek was caught between contradictory requirements of different sections of the military apparatus – on the one hand to hide the ugliness of the war sufficiently to keep enthusiasm for it high, yet on the other hand to show how wonderfully heroic the troops were in the face of horrible odds. At the same time she had her own complexity: she was on the one hand a patriotic Austro-Hungarian sharing many of the upper-middle class prejudices of her compatriots. But she was also an insightful writer who wanted to tell the truth. It was a classic war correspondents' dilemma – though in her case, the desire to tell the truth seems to have overruled other concerns at times. Years later, Ernest Hemingway would comment:

The last war, during the years of 1915, 1916, 1917, was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought.²⁰⁶

Hemingway's remark was broadly true of British, French and German war correspondents, who would have been most unlikely to get comments like those of Schalek into print. But in the Austrian wing of the Habsburg Empire censorship was inconsistent and the war of words was less effectively coordinated with the war of guns and bullets. There were more alternatives available than the three Hemingway acknowledges.

²⁰⁵ Schalek: *Ankunft im Hauptquartier*, NFP, 4. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Knightly, Phillip, 1975, p. 79

We might also see in this passage from Schalek an oblique criticism of the official method of war reporting, which, she indicates, makes no mention of the pain and blood of the soldiers. A few months earlier she had dared to criticise her country's bombing strategy. Now she has words to say about its information strategy. Yet her great skill here is to put these words alongside those of Borojevic himself. It was he, she said, who asked her to write honestly about his soldiers.

Schalek's second report was an account of events in the town of Gorizia. The Italian forces had earlier made a major attempt to take the town (the 'Third Battle of the Isonzo,' in November 1915), and in August 1916 they would try again and succeed. Strategic sections of the town had been heavily bombarded, there was sporadic shelling at the best of times, and during the 'Third Battle' this became heavier. Schalek was now in a real, active war zone and in a fair amount of danger. She begins her article by reporting that the town's military commander explained to her that there was a 'refugee camp' outside the town for those who wished to leave, but that he left that choice to the individual. He was able to offer her accommodation in the town in either of two hotels: the Hotel Post or the Park Hotel. He recommended the latter as it was further to the east, where enemy shells were less likely to strike.²⁰⁷ She was then introduced to a cavalry captain who drove her to the hotel. Upon arrival, he let slip that a few days earlier a female guest at the hotel had been shot, through her bedroom window, by a sniper's bullet. Then he reassured her, 'But you have a room on the safe side of the hotel where the shells never land.' Schalek comments:

I couldn't quite accept his definition of the 'safe side.' Almost every building in the city had been hit on both sides. Most buildings, in fact, had been hit from above, irregardless of 'sides.' At times a shell had finished up in the wine cellar and split the house in two from below. I found one such house cut in half right before my eyes as I looked out my window.²⁰⁸

That evening an officer accompanied Schalek on a walk through the town, to the banks of the Isonzo River. Shells were falling nearby as they made their way along streets riddled with destruction. The officer watched her reactions to the shell-bursts – one of which was perilously close - and asked whether she wanted to go on. It was, she says, 'a test of my nerves.' Schalek describes her impressions of the town, where 'not a single building is undamaged.'

You become dead silent inside when you look closely at these buildings. Life has vanished from them. What used to be here – happiness, love, desire – has been blown away like chaff. Who asks after the people who lived here? Are they dead? Are they starving somewhere? Are they searching for their children? It's impossible to grasp this suffering.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁰⁸ Schalek, Alice: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁰⁹ Schalek, Alice: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

One might expect her to conclude by condemning the Italians, as it was their shells that were slowly destroying the town, it was their choice to attack at the Isonzo and it was their offensive that brought Gorizia into the centre of the battle zone. But as she reaches the river bank and reflects on her first impressions, the blame is subtly shifted:

And here, in this unforgettable minute when I stand for the first time on the bank of the Isonzo, the river that has become for us a symbol of honour, a battle cry, an idol for thousands, here between the dead houses and in the face of holes in the ground that have become living quarters, war appears to me in its full, unspeakable absurdity. Is there anyone who can grasp why houses are being shot to pieces and people driven into rock caves? Who is demanding that which nobody wants? The war? Who is this war?²¹⁰

The blame lies not with Italy but with ‘the war.’ *‘War appears to me in its full, unspeakable absurdity.’* Schalek is making a statement that could have been classed as ‘pacifist’ if it had appeared in the British press: a blanket criticism of war itself. For a propagandist the sight of the bomb-damaged homes in Gorizia would have provided the perfect opportunity for anti-Italian rhetoric. But she makes none of it. The river that has become so strategically important to both sides has become ‘an idol’ – not specifically for the Italians, but ‘for thousands.’ It is as if the over-blown significance of the Isonzo river has mesmerised both sides and come to rule over them, driving them to acts of ‘unspeakable’ destruction. This is something that ‘nobody’ wants – neither the Italians nor the Austro-Hungarians. So, if neither the Italians nor the Austro-Hungarians want it, who does? Her answer, quite simply, is ‘war.’ She personifies ‘this war’ as the being ‘who’ is driving the destruction. The paragraph ends with the enigmatic question, ‘Who (not ‘What’) is this war?’ - in the German: *‘Wer (not ‘Was’) ist dieser Krieg?’* The Italian translation renders it: *‘Qui (not ‘Que’) è questa Guerra?’* Who is this war?²¹¹

Schalek has seen what many later commentators would see: that the Great War came to have a momentum of its own, and that at certain points it became absurd to blame the enemy for the urge to continue the fight, an urge that seemed to have possessed both sides. This could hardly have been, however, the kind of message the War Press Office and the War Surveillance Unit wished to propagate.

Gorizia was a focal point on the Isonzo front. Schalek was amazed that so many people had chosen to continue living in the town. Two-thirds of the inhabitants had left, but some 10,000 remained.²¹² She comments on the humour and frivolity she heard in the streets:

No-one here knows if they’ll still be alive tomorrow; or more accurately, everyone here knows they could be dead tomorrow. That’s why he’s laughing

²¹⁰ Schalek, Alice: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²¹¹ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 10; Schalek: *Isonzofront*, p. 31.

²¹² Cf.: Schindler, 2001, p. 105.

today, only because he's still alive. Nowhere but here does one live each minute so intensely.²¹³

A valuable aspect of this and a subsequent article is Schalek's description of the black humour that pervaded the conversation of those in the town, together with her feeling of awkwardness in the face of this, and her eventual realisation that this is one way that people living under random bombardment adjust to it and cope with it. She also found such humour to be a predominant aspect of life in the trenches.

Schalek is amazed that civilians have chosen to stay in the town and help keep its infrastructure going, rather than leave for the relative safety of a refugee camp. Cafes and hotels continue to service officers on leave. A newsstand-tobacconist has remained open, despite its position in full view of both snipers and artillery spotters and a placard, in three languages warning of the danger:

Closed! Street under fire!²¹⁴

She is further amazed – one morning while braving the danger to buy a newspaper – at the townspeople's reaction when shells fall near the shop.

The shop assistant threw what she was unpacking onto the floor and rushed outside for a look. Inquisitive people were coming from all sides. The crowd pressed round, gaping. Everyone wanted to see. Me, too, of course, but an ice-grey Croatian storm-trooper blocked my exit with his bayonette. 'No,' he said in tortured German, 'Another one's coming.' Quicker than you could think, the next shell whistled by. It fell somewhat further away, and the crowd ran zealously after it.²¹⁵

She then reports her own sense of shame at feeling such fear, when all those around her seem fully adjusted to living with the daily possibility of a brutal death or maiming. It would be facile to criticise Schalek for sanitising the horror of war by describing how well people apparently adjusted to it. It was, rather, a straightforward description of what she saw, together with her own frequent confessions of incredulity. Her report is valuable because it is a rare example of a description of civilians living, by conscious choice, in a town that is being slowly brought to ruins by shellfire.

A survival technique for such people was to learn to distinguish between the sounds of various types of incoming shells, so as to know what kind of evasive action to take. Schalek comments:

When it sings so strangely through the air, thin and sharp and long, that's the heavy mortar. When it passes over heavily and oppressive, like a railway train,

²¹³ Schalek: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²¹⁴ Schalek includes a photograph of the sign in *Am Isonzo*, p. 10. The languages are German, Italian and Slovenian.

²¹⁵ This version from Schalek: *Am Isonzo*, p. 10

that's the Howitzer. And when it sounds like a storm slamming a door shut – simply 'Boom!', without much warning – that's the mountain artillery. The mortars wail like an old crone, and the machinegun sounds like someone knocking on the door. When everything happens at once I lose my ability to differentiate.²¹⁶

In later years Schalek might have wished she had never written this brief passage. Her great literary adversary, Karl Kraus, used it as the basis of one of his caricatures of her in his play, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* ('The last days of mankind'). In the play the character 'SCHALEK' has arrived at a hidden front line observation post and insists on poking her head out for a look, despite an officer's warning that such a move might give their position away. She ignores him but it is too late. The enemy sees her and opens fire on the position. She ticks off the soldiers for being 'cowards.' The scene continues:

(the sound of hissing projectiles overhead)

SCHALEK: Ss! That was a shell.

OFFICER: No, that was shrapnel. Don't you know the difference?

SCHALEK: Apparently it's difficult for you to understand that my ears do not yet separate the finer sound nuances. But I have learned so much since I have been out here, I'll learn that too – It seems the show is over. What a pity – it was first-rate!

After further argument a runner brings news that a sergeant has been killed by the enemy fire. The 'SCHALEK' character responds:

SCHALEK: How simply the simple man makes his report! He is white as a sheet. Call it patriotism, hatred of the enemy, sport, adventure, or the joyous thrill of power – *I* call it humanity liberated. I am gripped by the fever of this experience! Lieutenant, just tell me now, what goes on in your mind, what do you feel?²¹⁷

In view of the context of Schalek's actual words, Kraus's caricature is unjustified. The last lines of the scene have been taken from her earlier war reporting when she was something of an adventurer in the glorious Tyrolean Alps. At that stage she may well have deserved hefty criticism. But Kraus has cleverly transposed these words into her later work. It is a pity that his version is the one remembered in Austria today, not hers.

We should also note that, in Schalek's report, this passage is closely followed by her report of a near miss that could have claimed her life. General Zeidler, commander of the division defending Gorizia, has invited himself to dinner with her one evening at the hotel. While they are dining, two shells crash into the hotel. The first explodes on the roof. A few seconds later the second shell hits:

The direct hit landed in the hotel six metres from our table. It went right through the bar by the dining room, blew it apart, and sent heavy splinters flying through

²¹⁶ Schalek: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²¹⁷ Kraus, 1974, Act 1, Scene 26, pp.56-58.

the crowd. Yes, sadly, there are casualties. Out of two dozen people it looks like three are injured.²¹⁸

The shell, Schalek adds, went right through the room, leaving an entry hole and an exit hole. She later described the event in a letter to General Ritter von Hoen:

I've had my baptism of fire. On 21 March a shell landed in the Park Hotel in the adjoining room, six metres from my table. I was having dinner with the divisional commander. Three people were seriously wounded. Yesterday we took three hits. It's most unpleasant when 'he'²¹⁹ turns up the heat here... There's real war here.²²⁰

She reported to her readers:

I'm managing all right to keep face. But my self-control is somewhat shaky. I'm not yet free of the cold shivers inside.²²¹

Nevertheless, she did not move out to the refuge camp, nor return to Vienna. She stayed on the Isonzo front and continued with her assignment.

In her *Am Isonzo* version of the incident, Schalek gives a full description of the aftermath of the shelling. Most of the guests leave, but Schalek and the hotel staff come together for mutual support. The passage reveals some of her attitudes toward women and their role in the war, and because of its uniqueness we look at it here in some detail.

After the injured are evacuated, the immediate reaction of the female hotel staff is superficially similar to Schalek's. All the guests have left except Schalek and a battle-weary lieutenant, on leave, who wants to be left to sleep. Apart from the lieutenant, the women in the hotel are now alone with the landlord, the [male] cook and the guard:

I can't shake free of this icy, inner chill. Blood being spilled, wreckage, shards of glass, a smoking, shot up water system, and distraught, tear-stained faces are all around me. 'I'm leaving in the morning, this is too much for me,' says Frau Schrah. 'Me too,' adds the [female] cook. 'And me,' repeats the housemaid. 'We've put up with this for long enough.'²²²

Frau Schrah, the hotel manager, finds some glasses of champagne left by the guests, and the group drink up together. Schalek continues:

The [male] hotelier makes a suggestion: he'll fetch a bottle of liquor and we'll all meet in my room – the 'shell-proof' room. There aren't enough chairs in my room

²¹⁸ Schalek: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

²¹⁹ 'He' was the local slang for the Italian artillery.

²²⁰ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter from Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, Görz, 24. March, 1916.

²²¹ Schalek: In Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

²²² Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 15.

but we sort ourselves out. Six of us drink from three glasses. And it gets cosier and cosier.²²³

They discuss the shelling and the question as to whether it might have been a targeted attack on the general. Then Schalek's guests tell her of earlier hits and the 'horrors' of the previous November, when they took to sleeping in the cellar. More shells crash nearby, and Gorizia's own artillery starts up in reply. Schalek wonders to herself what will happen to her if the hotel closes down:

'If you leave tomorrow,' I begin, but Frau Schrah interrupts me, astonished.
'Leave? What on earth do you mean?'

'So will meals be cooked tomorrow?'

'Of course,' says the [male] cook. 'Of course,' says the [female] cook. 'Of course,' says the hotelier. And Frau Schrah laughs. 'Every time we get hit, it's the same song. And then we stay. Where would the men go, when they come here exhausted from the hilltop defences?'

I listen quietly, deeply moved. I have the feeling that I've never had such noble guests between my four walls. In Vienna it's the custom to name the important people in the newspaper when an exquisite gathering comes together somewhere for an evening. *In the presence of this most distinguished of all societies that I've ever been part of, I draw your attention to Selma Schrah, the manager, Antonia Passath, the cook, Marie Hödle, the barmaid, Theresa Marwin, the kitchen hand, and Amalia Belusic, the dishwasher. The absence of Nico Filgin, the 'Piccolo,' and Anna Basteiner, the accountant, is understandably excused. They are in hospital.*

They've been here constantly, these women. Constantly offering service. Constantly cheerful. And now they're staying on. Once again offering service. Once again cheerful. Fully, as always for ten months.²²⁴

Two points stand out. Firstly, the men in the story become more and more invisible as the story progresses. We are not even told the names of the hotelier, the male cook and the guard. The hotelier provided the bottle of drink but did not perhaps join the party in the room. The male cook was certainly there at the end of the evening, as his comment is recorded. Perhaps he came and went only intermittently, as there were six people requiring seating, and his presence would make seven. Even if these two were not there for the whole of the party, they are certainly part of the group that has determined to stay on at the hotel. Yet Schalek does not include them in her list of distinguished guests. Nico, on the other hand, does appear in the list, as an injured and therefore absent member (he was injured by the shell). Yet even he is not included in Schalek's final tribute, 'They've been here constantly, *these women.*' [our italics]. In a previous passage, Schalek had established an acquaintance with Nico 'the Piccolo,' who was most likely a

²²³ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 16.

²²⁴ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 16-17.

dwarf. We note, too, that his name and nickname are Italian, so perhaps his presence in support of the Austro-Hungarian side had an extra significance.

But it is most interesting that Schalek crafts the narrative so that what starts out as a story of a mixed gathering becomes more and more focused on the courage and greatness of ordinary women. This gender filtering became a characteristic of Schalek's post-war writing, where she seemed to lose interest in ordinary men in her world travels and focus heavily on the lives and aspirations of ordinary women.

Secondly, Schalek puts these women, plus Nico, on the highest possible rung on the Viennese social ladder. She has never had 'more noble guests' (*vornehmere Gäste*), guests of more noble birth and provenance. They are an 'exquisite gathering' (*erlesne Versammlung*), that is, a group specially chosen for their qualities of accomplishment, leadership, valour or intelligence. They are 'the most distinguished of all societies.' Such a gathering would, says Schalek, warrant a report in the society pages of the Viennese press. It is the language one would use to describe a reception of generals, ambassadors, great scholars, duchesses, princes and the heads of fabulously wealthy families. For Schalek these women – a cook, a barmaid, a kitchen hand, a dishwasher and a hotel manager – are at the top of the Habsburg social ladder, together with an accountant and an ethnic Italian dwarf.

The next morning, while the women are back at their tasks, 'cleaning and polishing,' General Zeidler sends the hotel a bouquet of spring flowers. Schalek comments:

For while death stalks Gorizia, it's blossoming everywhere in the meadows and on the trees.²²⁵

It is not difficult to see how this narrative of the aftermath of the shelling would make powerful propaganda for the Austro-Hungarian war effort. The women who voluntarily stay at their posts amidst months of shelling, just so they can be there to serve the exhausted troops, make classic examples of the heroic self-offering that the country needed among all its citizens to pursue its war aims. At the same time there is an inherent put-down of those in Viennese high society who might have wished life to carry on as normal, with its lavish receptions and snobbish parties: the simple women who clean, cook and polish in the service of the troops are more noble, distinguished and exquisite than any Viennese celebrity. An ethnic Italian, too is setting a fine example for those other ethnic Italians in the empire who might wish to shirk their war duties. Even the lieutenant in the story is playing his part, refusing to retreat to safety when enemy shells rain down.

Yet there is a price to pay for the propaganda value of this passage. It is effective only because it is set in the context of the dreadful, slow death of a city being inexorably blown to pieces while the army tries to hold it. The entire article has shells falling, from beginning to end. Wherever Schalek looks, she sees ruins. Wherever she goes, she hears the terrifying crash of exploding bombs. The article ends with flowers, but also with the

²²⁵ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 17.

observation that 'death stalks Gorizia.' If people are inspired to join the war effort by reading her report, they are told in no uncertain terms that it will be deathly dangerous. Nor is it a clear-cut case of fighting in a good cause: in the middle of the article she raises fundamental questions about the reasons for the fighting. At this stage in her career Schalek was still a valuable asset in the propaganda effort. But the flip-side to this attribute – her decision to report the full ugliness of the front – was growing in strength.

Chapter Seven: Death on the Isonzo: Heavy artillery, freshly dug graves, and a Slovenian saga

One of the most gruesome aspects of the First World War was the arms race in artillery effectiveness and killing power.²²⁶ The latter decades of the 19th Century had seen major developments in high explosive chemicals. One kilogram of the high explosive being used by the armies of 1914-1918 had typically 75 to 100 times the destructive power of the same weight of dynamite. As the war dragged on, shell production increased on both sides, reaching a peak in 1917 of a total of about a million shells a day. In the first five days of the Battle of the Somme, which took place from July to November 1916, the British fired 1.5 million shells, a hellish barrage that terrified the Germans. Their survival rate was high only because many left their concentrated front line trenches and sheltered in foxholes spread out over a very wide area. But at this stage shell production was far from its peak, and both sides were still learning how to use these weapons to maximum effectiveness.

Two years later the Germans attacked in Champagne, firing 2 million shells in just over four hours, a barrage 40 times as intensive as the British had fired on the Somme. When the Americans entered the war they fired more explosive power of artillery in one battle than the entire Union side had fired in the four year long American Civil War.²²⁷

Tactics in the use of artillery were also developing. At first, guns had to ‘register’ – fire preliminary shots to gauge range and wind drift - before firing a barrage, thus giving warning to the enemy that an attack was imminent. During the course of the war mathematical methods were developed to replace this. Other developments included the ‘creeping barrage,’ where infantry and artillery co-ordinated their efforts so that the former was able to advance (in theory, at least) just metres behind a ‘curtain’ of exploding shells that slowly moved forward ahead of them. Meanwhile, of course, measures to protect defenders from intensive shelling were developed, including deeper, stronger shelters, and a thinner concentration of men in the forward trenches with higher concentrations in reserve at the rear.

Deaths and injuries from artillery fire were horrific. High explosive shells blew men apart, dismembered them or disembowelled them. Shrapnel shells, filled with metal balls and jagged fragments, ripped into their bodies and caused death through loss of blood or infection. Thousands died slowly in excruciating pain after being shelled in unsuccessful attacks that left them stranded in no-man’s land between the opposing armies’ trenches.

Alice Schalek first observed and experienced artillery technology close up – at both the sending and the receiving ends – in 1916, when both sides were still on a steep learning

²²⁶ See Stevenson, 2004, pp. 179-197 for a discussion of the First World War arms race in weapons and technology.

²²⁷ Stevenson, 2004, pp. 421-442 includes a discussion of the American contribution to the final phases of the war.

curve. We see in her reports a fascination for the technology of targeting, together with revealing descriptions of daily life in cramped spotters' quarters, reflections on the nerve-shattering experience of being shelled incessantly, and heartfelt sorrow at the sight of infantrymen going into the zone of fire.

In the first of these articles Schalek is taken on a visit to the artillery observation post on San Marco. She describes the trek through the communication trenches,

... through excrement and mud, through perilously loose soil, but among blossoming almond trees.²²⁸

It was a characteristic of her battle zone reports to include descriptions of the landscape, and particularly any signs of colour or flowering, that stood in contrast to the barrenness of the equipment and detritus of war. She describes the cramped quarters of the artillery spotters' foxhole. In contrast to the matter-of-fact style of her colleagues in the War Press Office, Schalek brings her readers right into the foxhole with vivid detail:

It's a tiny space, some four square metres in size, built into a flank of a hill oriented towards the enemy. Inside it's lined a little with boards, roofing felt and paper; outside it's camouflaged with branches. In the front the peep hole is open. It's in the form of a letterbox slot facing the enemy lines. And here inside, in the dark, humid, cramped hole in the ground, sit the battery commander and his officers, day after day, morning till night.²²⁹

The landscape on the Isonzo is rugged and varied, and Schalek noted that it was often impossible to get clear views of the same object from two different places. She recorded how the spotters co-ordinated by telephone with a network of observation posts spread throughout the hills, to get a fix on suspected enemy movements. She describes the wasteland of shattered villages in the battle zone between the two armies, and notes:

There's an artillery officer who set fire to his own factory with shelling.²³⁰

As she promised to be 'as quiet as a mouse,' Schalek was permitted to stay for a few days with the spotters. While she watched the hills and peaks round about, she came to appreciate the coordination between artillery and infantry:

It's only the working together of artillery and infantry that makes it possible to hold the Isonzo... They all have the same common aim: to defend Austria-Hungary.²³¹

She was right that the Austro-Hungarian stance on the Isonzo was entirely defensive, as the Habsburg empire had not sought war with Italy, nor anticipated that their southern

²²⁸ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Auf dem Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²²⁹ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²³⁰ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 22. Some quotations here are from the book version of Schalek's articles.

²³¹ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 3

neighbour would attempt to invade their territory. It was a desperate defence against enemy forces much larger than their own, and Schalek was impressed with the skill and tenacity of her own country's forces. In the book version of her report she adds the observation:

In the war we're making the front impregnable, even for the strongest opponent. In peacetime, however, every idiot runs rings around us.²³²

It was one of her pet themes: the sloppiness of Austro-Hungarian industry and civilian administration compared to that of rival empires.

She then returned to another favourite theme: the tardy Italians:

Their attacks suffer the same delays that plague their trains in peacetime. During the first three battles of the Isonzo this seems to have been the main cause of their failure. What use is their superior strength, their verve, their pluck – that every man here envies – when it's all ruined by their lack of punctuality... In every case it was Italian slackness, disorganisation, failure to focus their driving power, that we were able to exploit.²³³

Perhaps a certain shabbiness of timing and organisation did have something to do with Italy's failure to penetrate the Austro-Hungarian lines. But it was a failure that was being played out all through the war, especially on the western front. As we noted earlier, it was difficult for large armies to capitalise on their gains without losing contact with their supply lines and becoming vulnerable to counter-attack. It is noteworthy, however, that Schalek is now painting the Italian soldier in a more positive light – he has 'verve' and 'pluck.' Presumably his aversion to soap and water, which she found so disgusting a year earlier, has become less relevant in the heat of battle.

As she watched the work of the spotters she was shocked at the initial sense of satisfaction she felt in seeing a direct hit on an Italian position and the apparent indifference the soldiers felt towards the killing they were seeing every day. She commented:

All my ideas have been turned upside down. Am I not justifying the fact that people there are being shot dead? I see only that they are blasting our city – the hospital, the barracks, the railway station – indiscriminately, pointlessly, as an insult to the word 'culture.' And all of us here together, of whatever spirit or moral outlook, have only one wish: to bring them to silence.²³⁴

She was able to make a certain amount of meaning out of the killing on the grounds that it was in this case a defensive action. But this still stretched her moral framework and she was led to conclude that 'everything that's happening here is ... beyond good and evil,

²³² Schalek: *Am Isonzo*, p. 25.

²³³ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²³⁴ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

beyond notions of civilisation,²³⁵ and that ‘one cannot judge it ... on the basis of traditional categories.’²³⁶

The war had changed young men into beings she struggled to understand:

Are these really the fashionable gents from former days, who crouch now in holes in the ground, wet through and filthy, in ragged tunics with mud-encrusted boots, and who have only one thought: attack, destroy, annihilate?²³⁷

She was seeing up close what thousands of soldiers on all sides reported happened to them in the trenches: they left their civilised ways behind and became a different kind of being.

Schalek also noted the strange, cold professionalism of the spotters. When an Italian shell flew over the observation post on its way to Gorizia, she commented:

This is how it strikes me: imagine a 21-er passing over us on its way to the city, a so-called ‘canary bird,’ whose tearing flight-scream precedes it like a motorcycle at full throttle. As the shell falls with an ear-splitting boom on the railway embankment, it’s almost as if the lieutenant thinks to himself, ‘And you mustn’t forget that this one here has also been fired by an Italian lawyer from Bologna, or an engineer from Rome, or some other thoroughly decent chap from a thoroughly decent city.’²³⁸

This was not the first time that Schalek would imply that the soldiers on both sides had more in common with each other than with the civilians on the home front.

A second lieutenant remarked to her how irrelevant the local newspapers were, as they continued to report banal events such as a stolen handbag or a sprained ankle. Again restating her belief that people on the home front showed too little recognition of the deeds and sacrifice of front line soldiers, Schalek declared that each of these soldiers deserved ‘a memorial on the Ringstrasse.’²³⁹

In the book version of the article Schalek describes an Austro-Hungarian infantry attack, preceded by an artillery barrage, as seen from the observation nest. When news of the forthcoming attack comes through, all is solemn and downcast:

But one morning there’s neither philosophy nor humour. Faces are deadly serious. Silently they mouth the words: ‘It’s happening this afternoon.’²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

²³⁶ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

²³⁷ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

²³⁸ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 27.

²³⁹ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 4. The ‘Ringstrasse’ is the wide circular avenue that encloses Vienna’s central ‘First District’ and on which many of its grand municipal and cultural buildings stand.

²⁴⁰ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 29.

The action begins with a barrage at four p.m:

It slams and snarls and whistles. Missiles wind their way through the air like flying snakes. The flashes grow more and more garish as the dusk closes in.²⁴¹

The Italians begin to return fire:

First he just ‘tickles’ a bit in our direction. Then he turns up the heat angrily, wilder and wilder at us. Then he pounds our position with furious rage.

Everyone’s finding it hard to breathe. It presses heavily on every chest and strangles every throat.²⁴²

The lieutenant attempts to cheer her up, likening the barrage to an ‘alpine symphony.’ Schalek has already compared the operation to a ‘play,’ because of the hours of rehearsal the spotters had gone through during the day, since they were going to have to work in blackout conditions. A reader could well feel that the analogy of a play is far too light-hearted. But she goes on:

The overture continues without interruption till 7 o’clock. The hour strikes. You can hear it from the church tower. And now the tragedy begins.

‘Now the shellfire will be laid further back. The infantry is going in.’

‘The infantry is going in!’

Never was an ‘Our Father’ said more fervently in a church than here in this sentence.²⁴³

The men, she says, speak these words with tender reverence, ‘Like a mother who’s giving her son away.’²⁴⁴

On the one hand, this passage is an attempt to praise the courage of foot-soldiers going into the hell of battle. At the same time, however, it shows her own sadness that young men are being sent to their deaths. If it is a play, it is a ‘tragedy.’ She opens this phase of the story with the words, ‘*And now the tragedy begins.*’ The spotters speak of it ‘Like a mother who’s giving her son away.’ Schalek is not just describing the scene, as General Boroevic had asked her to. She is putting a spin on it. It is a tragedy – in both senses of the word. It is in this context that the remainder of the passage needs to be seen:

²⁴¹ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 29.

²⁴² Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 30.

²⁴³ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 30.

²⁴⁴ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 30.

The night is dark. Few stars are shining now. Over there and over here the hissing noises come and go. On this side and that the gun muzzles flare, the shellbursts flash. Flare rockets, red and white, rise slowly amidst the smoke. 'Firewall!' sounds the command. Thundering like a hurricane over open sea roars the noise through the darkness. We see nothing but a death-spewing chaos of fire and smoke. But we know: the infantry is heading into the midst of it.²⁴⁵

Shells would continue to rain down on Schalek's world as she went on with her assignment. Some days later she was taken by horse and cart to visit a military cemetery that was being established at Salcano, north of Gorizia, hard on the banks of the Isonzo. The road to Salcano lay in full view of Italian positions, so it was screened with branches. The Italians could no longer 'indulge in a comfortable turkey-shoot ... from a safe distance,' but would still 'blast away at [the road] a little from time to time.' Many of the horses were not battle-trained and 'take fright with every shot.'²⁴⁶ During Schalek's journey to Salcano a shrapnel shell falls close up ahead. The horse panics but the coachman restrains it and carries on, hardly batting an eyelid. A few days earlier three shells had landed in the hotel garden while she was waiting to be picked up for an excursion. She comments that the troops and civilians have learned to live with the 'Monte Carlo' – the gamble – against death, as this is the only way they can carry on with their daily tasks. She finds it utterly astonishing that people carry on as if nothing is amiss while shells crash down from time to time.

She reaches the cemetery and reflects on its incomplete, desolate state:

There's no decoration here to mitigate your impression. The two graves of the six men who were interred here yesterday are still open, the bodies covered only with a little earth. Vainglorious²⁴⁷ heroes lie there.²⁴⁸

She then describes the monument that is to be made:

In the middle of the site stands a slab of granite from which a memorial is to be built. It's to be ten metres high and very visible. A captured Italian master builder will do this work. When he heard that the remains of Italian heroes also rest here, and that he could turn his art to the honour of all the fallen, he gladly made himself available... One day this place will be a tourist attraction, artistically set with cypresses, roses and sculptures. Right now it's the saddest patch of ground in the world.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 30.

²⁴⁶ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 31. Also in Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Eine Mondnacht auf dem Monte Sabotino, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁴⁷ Or 'Unsung'

²⁴⁸ Schalek, : Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁴⁹ Schalek, : Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

Schalek's words about Italian soldiers here are among the most respectful of all her wartime writings. She was able to recognise that, if the Austro-Hungarian soldiers were heroic, then so must be their Italian enemies. In her final comment she sets the current starkness of the graveyard against its future attractiveness. She does not say which of these atmospheres she prefers, but her implication is that the current state of the cemetery is the more authentic. A sad, reflective mood is more appropriate than the sanitised feel of a '*Sehenswürdigkeit*' (tourist attraction).

That evening, accompanied by a senior officer, Schalek climbed to the top of Monte Sabotino, which lay to the north of Gorizia, and spent a night observing the soldiers' life in mountaintop trenches. Monte Sabotino was a key position and had been a goal of repeated Italian attacks, but each had been repulsed by Austro-Hungarian artillery.²⁵⁰ The path up the mountain was continually under fire from Italian forces, and here Schalek encountered the supply troops who plodded up and down with food and provisions. She described these as 'the quietest, the most indefatigable, the humblest of soldiers.'²⁵¹ They were aged, ragged, and stooped. She was impressed with their work, as they made their arduous journey every night exposed to great danger, and felt they 'merited their own chapter in the history of the war.'²⁵² Front line troops went through massive quantities of food, water, ammunition, tobacco, toilet paper, reading material, etc., and huge sections of the military apparatus were dedicated to supplying them in their forward positions. In most war histories the intrepid porters, who carried the supplies the last few hundred metres to the trenches, day after day, in constant danger, hardly rate a mention.

When Schalek reached the summit she noted the soldiers' accommodation – the so called 'swallow's nests,' built on cliff edges:

They lean on the naked, wet stone and stand on a ledge of naked, wet earth. Right beside them there's a sheer drop to the depths.²⁵³

They were, she said, two square metres in size, and housed up to five soldiers each. She describes them to her readers:

Drops are falling through the roof. The rocks give off a stifling dampness. The young men can never undress. They've never got a corner to themselves alone, never an hour of comfort. By day it's icy cold in the unsealed wooden hut: smoke from an oven would give them away... And when the fire is lit in the evening they feel like they're roasting.²⁵⁴

Nevertheless the soldiers told her their current life was luxurious in comparison to the time of the First Battle of the Isonzo, when, they said:

²⁵⁰ Cf.: Schaumann, 1993, p. 114.

²⁵¹ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁵² Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁵³ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁵⁴ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

Three thousand Italian corpses covered the mountain flanks, and those of our troops were on the summit. Worse even than the battle was the stench of decay. There was water to drink, but only a quarter of a litre per man each day, since every drop of water had to be carried up the mountain. No one could have a wash. Throughout the day there was nothing to eat.²⁵⁵

Schalek saw in these men the confirmation of Boroevic's praise of his soldiers:

Here they stand, unpretentious and steadfast, braving the ghastliest of dangers... None of them crave admiration. They march stolidly forward, as if it's the most natural thing in the world.²⁵⁶

Again she has returned to a patriotic theme and used her journalism in support of the aims of the commanding officer. But she justifies her claims that the soldiers are heroic, by depicting something of the horrors, in the face of which they are doing their duty: thousands of corpses, including those of their own compatriots on the summit; the stench of rotting bodies; the extreme measures they must take against being spotted and shelled; the life and death danger of even simple things such as supplying food and water; the constant cold and damp.

After Monte Sabotino Schalek visited Podgora Heights, 'a long, low hill standing alone and without cover from the rear.'²⁵⁷ The lengthy article she wrote about the experience, entitled 'The Secret of Podgora,' was published in two parts in the *Neue Freie Presse*, on 19 and 20 April, again a full month after her visit.

The Podgora Heights lay directly before Gorizia and were often under heavy artillery fire. They had been the scene of fierce attacks and counter-attacks, but up to that time all Italian attempts to take them had failed. Schalek wondered how this was so, as she had now come to believe the Italians,

... with their capable officers, with unsurpassable artillery and a host of technical achievements, ... had to be regarded as a formidable opponent.²⁵⁸

Asking how they had been kept at bay, she found the answer in the 'Podgora heroes,'²⁵⁹ the Austro-Hungarian soldiers who, she said, were prepared to offer their lives every day for their country, and 'not only because they have to, but also because they can see how necessary it is.'²⁶⁰ While it is difficult to confirm this from written records, local people claim the defence of the Podgora Heights was undertaken largely by Slovenian units.²⁶¹ Schalek herself calls them 'Dalmation' (see below), a term she often used generically for south west Serbs. This would explain why they were so determined and 'could see how

²⁵⁵ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

²⁵⁶ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²⁵⁷ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Das Geheimnis der Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁵⁸ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁵⁹ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁶⁰ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁶¹ Conversations at the Museum of Nova Gorica, 24 January 2006 (R.G.).

necessary' the defence was. The Slovenians felt they were defending their homeland and their culture against an aggressive invader.

This was not, however, jingoistic bravado. Schalek comments:

And they admit quite plainly that they don't enjoy it at all.²⁶²

Her first port of call on the Podgora Heights was a knoll, named 'Hill 184,' which, she said, 'is without doubt the most heavily bombarded point in this entire world war.'²⁶³ The way led through the pulverised village of Podgora, and on through a communication trench to the crest of the hill. What she saw made upon her 'one of the deepest impressions of my life, ... perhaps the deepest.'²⁶⁴ She describes how the troops were living:

The ground is totally churned up. Yellow grey water spurts up to the edge of the soldiers' boots. Earth walls have slid and collapsed, and can no longer give any protection. Wire trench supports lined with sackcloth, iron palings and sandbags are scattered about... The sentries, squatting, throw their soil-encrusted coats over their heads, looking themselves like sandbags. They press their faces to the sandbags and peer out towards the enemy through a gap.²⁶⁵

Schalek was shocked by the conditions the men were living in. She felt there was hardly anyone on earth who 'would not be thrown into dismay by this place.'²⁶⁶

She then makes a curious remark about the mixture of races in the Isonzo army. The Austro-Hungarian armed forces were made up of all the national groups in the empire, but were carefully divided along racial lines. This was so that soldiers could be commanded in their own language, and also to get the best motivation from the troops. There was no point in putting Ukrainians against their brother Russians, or Italian Austro-Hungarians against Italy. Boroevic was Croatian, and many of his units were Croatian and Slovenian, but there were many other national groups in his Isonzo army. While noting that the 'Dalmatian' units on Podgora had defended the heights tenaciously during the Fourth Battle of the Isonzo, Schalek commented that whichever nationality was in the firing line at any particular time turned out to be 'the most heroic.'²⁶⁷

This apparently insignificant remark would have touched a soft spot for many of her readers. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was unique among the warring powers, in that it held together so many nations and races under one banner. This was not an easy task but it had brought many advantages, including a great deal of tolerance between groups which might otherwise have been at each others' throats. For the Jews of the empire it

²⁶² Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁶³ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁶⁴ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²⁶⁵ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²⁶⁶ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²⁶⁷ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

had provided a culture of tolerance that was almost unique in Europe, and when the empire finally fell apart and was divided into nation-states, the Jews became more and more marginalised. This was the case whether or not they had converted to Christianity, as Schalek had. For Jewish writers, such as Schalek, every sign of inter-racial harmony was a gift from heaven.

However, for Schalek the nationalities fighting on the enemy side were different. Although her observations were slowly forcing her to the view that the Italians were as praiseworthy as any other nationals, she had not got there yet. She compares them to the so-called 'Dalmatians' (most likely Slovenians and possibly including Croatians):

The difference is that the Italians don't hold out in an artillery barrage but the Dalmatians do. The first attack from their side is always resolute. But when the forward rows are gunned down the Italians lose their nerves. The Dalmatian, on the other hand, stands firm, till he falls.²⁶⁸

Were the Italians' nerves really so weak under fire? Italian war historian Mario Silvestri disagrees in general terms. While he sees truth in some of Schalek's allegations of inferior organisation and poor co-ordination between infantry and artillery on the Italian side, he finds no evidence that the Italian soldier was any less stolid than the Austro-Hungarian.²⁶⁹ It might have been different on Podgora, however, due to Slovenian determination. Her remarks also serve a propagandist purpose: to reassure readers that the empire was secure against invasion, but only because of the quality and dedication of Boroevic's troops, who showed 'superiority in the face of the enormous power of the Entente.'²⁷⁰ She maintained that 'only the stronger heart, only the iron will, only the individual man wrings success.'²⁷¹

Schalek reached the next ridge, Hill 240, through ditches and trenches that were 'a little less crushed about,'²⁷² Once again she was impressed with the support troops, 'the sappers, who carve out the trenches and lay the bridges under fire, and the telephone linesmen, who search along the wires under fire till they find the break and repair it.'²⁷³ She then describes the primitive dugouts the combat troops lived in:

How grotesquely the men house themselves here: damp, dark and cramped, these dugouts bored into the mountains. On the beds lie sandbags as pillows, empty sacks as foot-warmers for freezing toes. Straw is the mattress for the exhausted body that never gets out of its clothes.²⁷⁴

Schalek now feels she has found the 'secret of Podgora': how it is that the men on the Isonzo front have held out so long against incessant Italian onslaughts. It is their

²⁶⁸ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²⁶⁹ Silvestri, Mario, 'Introduzione', in Schalek, Alice, *Isonsofront*, pp. 17-18.

²⁷⁰ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁷¹ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁷² Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁷³ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

²⁷⁴ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Das Geheimnis der Podgora, NFP, 20. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

'*Kaltblütigkeit*.' As we previously remarked, the word can be literally translated 'cold-bloodedness,' though it can carry less negative connotations than the English equivalent and can also mean 'cool-headedness' or 'emotionless-ness.' It is most likely the state, often referred to in literature about front line soldiers in the First World War, where after months of shelling, shooting, killing, losing their companions, living among men dying in brutal agony and sharing trenches with the corpses and severed limbs of their friends, the soldier becomes something of an automaton. He switches off from all moral and aesthetic considerations and acts entirely within a mode of pure survival. He crouches in a dugout day after day, night after night amidst the thundering terror of shells, because there is no where else to go. He charges into machinegun fire because not to do so would either betray his homeland, or earn him a bullet in the back from his commanding officer. Schalek called this *Kaltblütigkeit*. She describes the scene:

The enemy lobbs shells at him day and night without letup. There's never quiet; never a break for the nerves... The mind is heated up as in a fever, the men in continual state of detachment from reality.²⁷⁵

This all sounds authentic. These are real men clinging to their sanity in the face of impossible horrors. But she then adds a softener: 'But their hearts beat in time.'²⁷⁶ To some extent this would have been true, of soldiers who were keenly aware that they were fighting for the survival of their culture and way of life. But it might also be that she cannot leave these men to be their brutalised selves, and has to overlay them with noble attributes. It would not do to end her article with her readers thinking that artillery bombardments really do turn the empire's soldiers into automatons (at best – many others broke down and became whimpering idiots). Whatever awful effects the shelling was having on them, they remained heroic, calm, with steadily beating hearts.

Nevertheless, the extent of their heroism could only be maintained against the backdrop of the real precariousness of the situation. Podgora, she said, was being defended 'by the army as one man hanging over an abyss, clinging by his fingernails.'²⁷⁷ It is one of Slovenia's most reverently remembered military episodes, and Schalek has given historians a vivid picture of it.

²⁷⁵ Schalek: Podgora (Part II), NFP, 20. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁷⁶ Schalek: Podgora (Part II), NFP, 20. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁷⁷ Schalek: Podgora (Part II), NFP, 20. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

Chapter Eight The point of no return: More from the Isonzo Front

In Alice Schalek's reports from her first two weeks on the Isonzo front we see a crystallisation of changes that have been forming in her writing for some time. Chief among these is that she now better appreciates the front line soldiers' daily grind and has considerable insights into how the men are coping, both psychologically and physically, with the constant threat of death or maiming, the appalling physical conditions of their daily existence, and the moral nihilism of living only to kill other men. While at times she continues to blame the Italians for being the aggressors in the war, she now finds herself condemning 'the war' itself, as if it is a being that neither side knows how to tame. She is growing to respect the Italian soldiers for their verve, pluck and commitment, though she still sees the Austro-Hungarians as more resolute and steadfast, and less inclined to sloppiness. She is also reporting that the Italian soldiers in general are becoming disillusioned with both their military and political leaders for pushing them into a war that has no moral justification and makes no military sense.

We can now see a pattern developing in her reporting: on the one hand she is steadfastly patriotic, writing propaganda that extols the heroism of Habsburg troops and draws attention to the faults of the enemy. Yet on the other hand she is bringing vivid descriptions of the horrid reality of the front line – and repeatedly asserting her view that those on the home front need to get a good feel for this. The latter aspect would not have been seen by the War Surveillance Unit as conducive to the war effort. None of the warring nations wanted the appalling conditions on the front to become the subject of public discussion.²⁷⁸

Schalek has also made oblique criticisms of her country: its bombing campaign, and the paucity of detail about the human cost of the war in official press releases about the war.

There was always the danger that Schalek could fall foul of the authorities, particularly under two key prohibitions in Austrian law: '*Majestätsbeleidigung*' (insulting His Majesty), and 'Disturbing the peace.'²⁷⁹ During the war, any criticism of the government, the state or the military, or any complaint about conditions, could be taken as an insult to the Kaiser, in whose name the war was being waged. 'Disturbing the peace' could be interpreted even more liberally.²⁸⁰ Many Viennese, women included, were arrested and imprisoned for what may seem minor offences under these laws. In one typical example, a 27 year old grocery clerk named Theresa Bartsch was sentenced to six months in jail for

²⁷⁸ See the discussion on British and American censorship in World War I in Knightly, 1975 pp 109-110, and Matthews, 1957, pp. 155-173..

²⁷⁹ Paragraphs 63 and 65 of the Austrian Penal Code.

²⁸⁰ See the detailed discussion in Healy, 2002, pp. 1-35.

shouting at a group of soldiers: ‘Stick the flags in the oven and stay home so the war will finally end.’²⁸¹

While Schalek’s comments were not as overt as Bartsch’s, they were far more persistent and reached a much wider audience than a cry of anguish in a grocery store. Schalek was indeed on dangerous ground, and in just a few months an official complaint would begin to stir against her. In the meantime, however, her tour of the Isonzo front continued.

After her visit to the Podgora Heights Schalek was sent to report on a field hospital well behind the lines. For this part of her assignment she had to leave her hotel in Gorizia, and stayed in safer quarters at a base camp.

Leaving Gorizia was an emotional wrench. She had been accepted into the comradeship of those who lived under the constant stress of the battle zone – both the soldiers in the forward positions, and the civilians who had chosen to stay behind in the town. She comments:

... the bonds of shared danger and constant alertness loose themselves as from one’s own self. The circle closes at this moment for the others; I am left outside, alone. Once again I am the city dweller, the foreigner, the one from the other side of the land. Never before have I felt such a gulf between myself and others.²⁸²

The gulf she had often reported on, between those at the front and those back home, was now being felt in her own person. She had felt bonded to those who bore the terrors and suffering of the war, but now she was outside their circle, in a different world. It was a gulf that soldiers, too, experienced, when they left the front for home leave. As we noted earlier, Erich Maria Remarque brings this vividly to life in *All quiet on the western front*. His character, Paul Bäumer, finds it impossible to reconcile the two different worlds, of front line and home front, when he makes his first trip home on leave.

But Schalek’s feeling for the front line soldier was here to stay. The evening of her departure she heard a report of a success on the front. She reflects:

The entire empire will read about it tomorrow. Everywhere glasses will be blissfully emptied. Success! But I think silently of the linesmen, the trench mortars, the medics. To me this victory runs red with blood. ‘We have only light losses.’ And in my quarters I sit and weep.²⁸³

This is a complete contrast to her early reporting from Tyrol, where a battle was ‘a play, that no artist’s skill could make more thrilling or passionate,’²⁸⁴ and where many of the

²⁸¹ Healy, 2002, p. 26. Bartsch’s sentence was reduced to six weeks on the grounds that, being a woman, she could be given lenience for making the comments in ‘a highly agitated mood’ with ‘no malicious intent.’

²⁸² Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Von der Front in die Etappe, NFP, 13. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁸³ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Von der Front in die Etappe, NFP, 17. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁸⁴ Schalek: Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

soldiers, she said, ‘don’t want the war to end.’²⁸⁵ It is also, once again, a dig at the standard style of war press releases: this will be reported as a ‘success,’ but it must be seen as *‘blutigrot’* – it runs red with blood. In a sense she is educating her readers to read blood and tragedy between the lines when they see the bland reports of battles and victories that feature in the daily press.

The next morning she talked with wounded soldiers at the field hospital. She maintained that, to really understand what they were saying, you had to have been there and seen it for yourself:

For those to whom the names [of the front line positions] by themselves don’t bring a picture to mind, a description will mean nothing to them.²⁸⁶

Despite her own journalistic skills, she claims she could never get the right words to bring such a picture to her readers. Only, perhaps, ‘the empire’s best poet’²⁸⁷ could do the job, a job which so much needed to be done that every poet’s pen should be engaged, and ‘if even the smallest of poet’s pens is missing, ... there’s a dereliction of duty.’²⁸⁸

She then describes the wounded soldiers themselves, in a skilful mix of patriotism and oblique criticism of war:

Despite their suffering, all these men’s faces express a sense of deliverance. Whoever has visited the sick in peacetime and remembers their self-obsessed, demanding looks ... would be forced to recognise here, tenderly and full of feeling, that for these people it’s sheer happiness to be ill. They’re so glad to be allowed to rest, that they want nothing, never complain. They just lie there ... lie with the full weight of their poor feverish bodies.²⁸⁹

The passage carries a tone of patriotism in that it praises the soldier’s good nature while they are suffering on their sickbeds. But the real reason for their ‘sheer happiness’ is that they are well away from the front line and getting rest from its continual stress and fatigue. Nobody really wants to be in the trenches, not even a heroic Austro-Hungarian.

We do have to ask, however, whether the army had chosen this particular hospital, or section of a hospital, for her to visit, as she does not speak of being shocked or nauseated by the sight of appalling injuries. Battlefield injuries typical of trench warfare included severed limbs, parts of the face blown away, shattered pelvises, intestinal maiming. Amputations were extremely common, and the sight and smell of gangrene was ubiquitous. It was not unusual even for experienced nurses to pass out or vomit on their first visit to a front line hospital. In view of her more revealing descriptions of front line reality in her reports before and after this one, it is unlikely that she is playing down the

²⁸⁵ Schalek: Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 3.

²⁸⁶ Schalek: Von der Front, NFP, 17. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁸⁷ Schalek: Von der Front, NFP, 17. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁸⁸ Schalek: Von der Front, NFP, 17. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁸⁹ Schalek: Von der Front, NFP, 17. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

ugliness of the hospital scene. Rather, the generals probably kept her away from the more typical wards.

Nevertheless she closes her story on a note of irony. She reports how impressed she is with the organisation and smooth functioning of the hospital, and concludes:

All that civilisation has contrived, is put to use to repair the damage that the failure of civilisation has brought forth.²⁹⁰

The war is *das Versagen der Zivilisation* - the failure of civilisation.

Schalek had a break from the front for a month and arrived back in Gorizia on 4 May. The shelling had subsided and spring had come. She begins her first article:

Roses, roses, roses are blooming in Gorizia. To me it's as if I were seeing the town for the first time. It seems foreign to me. This is how it must strike you when you come home from the war and the child you left behind now greets you as a young woman. The town of Gorizia is in full bloom. Roses, thousands and thousands of roses are blooming in and around the town; and moreover it's flower day in the streets. Roses are carried around in delightful little baskets by delightful girls, who are no less radiant than the roses they are offering.²⁹¹

Schalek has been criticised for using the charm of such scenes as a means of glorifying the war. Silverman, for example points out that

... in the rest of this article Schalek only mentions the destroyed train station, the number of Italian soldiers who have been shot, or taken prisoner, and the dangers of exploding mines. It seems that Schalek, while hoping to achieve the maximum contrasting effect by beginning a report from a destroyed battle city with a romantic description of the roses in bloom and the beautiful women who accompany them, unfortunately minimized the gruesome particulars of the war in doing so.²⁹²

But such criticism misses the context of Schalek's reporting. To begin with, she compares the changed scene in Gorizia with the changes a soldier experiences when he comes home after many years at the front. The reality for the soldier is the ever-existing front, while the homecoming is merely a brief respite while on leave. Further, it is the rose-bedecked town that is 'foreign' to Schalek; its normal state is a battle zone. She goes on:

Blossom day in the battle zone! The days are quiet here now – no comparison with my first visit. Though the occasional shell still lands on the town.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Schalek: Von der Front, NFP, 17. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 3.

²⁹¹ Alice Schalek, *Am Isonzo*: p. 72.

²⁹² Silverman, 2005, p. 41.

²⁹³ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Oslavia, der gestorbene Hügel, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 1-2.

It was, as we have seen, quite common for Schalek to notice and comment on flowers, blossoms, or any sign of life in nature, while among the trenches. This does not need to be seen as a device to minimise the ugliness of war, nor necessarily to emphasise its gruesome nature by way of contrast. Rather, it is simply an observant journalist noting what was there. The city *was* in flower, and she noted it – just as thousands of British soldiers remember the poppies at Flanders. While Schalek does at times trivialise the awfulness of battle (or at least, report the soldiers’ black humour which often works by trivialising terror), she is not doing so here.

Schalek then went to see the hill of Oslavia, that had been heavily bombarded during earlier battles, fought over viciously, then recaptured against very stiff odds by the Austro-Hungarians. This unexpected victory had won it a certain amount of fame and prestige in the empire, and the name ‘Oslavia’ had a ring to it in Austria-Hungary,²⁹⁴ somewhat like the name ‘El Alamein’ has to the British or ‘Dien Bien Phu’ to the Vietnamese. Schalek contrasts the spring colours of the landscape with the reality of war:

In the middle of this burgeoning, blossoming landscape, drunk with nature, lies a yellow patch. You have to use the word ‘yellow’ because language has no other word for this colour; it was formed after language had already developed. Our culture brought this colour into existence, this cross between the colour of sulphur and the tan of clay and the skin of a corpse.²⁹⁵

In this skilful and frank description Schalek lures the reader in with an engaging description of the beauty and fecundity of nature, then draws attention to a ‘yellow patch,’ ending the paragraph with ‘the skin of a corpse’ (*Leichenhaut*). She does not say whether the colour of the patch is actually made up of sulphur, clay and corpses or is simply best described as reminiscent of these. Either way, she makes it plain to her readers that ‘our culture’ has caused these things: sulphur from countless explosions, clay from the relentless hail of shells, and a pale deathly hue as of the ever-present corpses of the battlefield. The entire hill of Oslavia is this indescribable colour.

Schalek, a passionate mountaineer and lover of nature, follows this with a comment that seems to arise out of her description of Oslavia, but almost certainly has a wider reference:

But to murder mountains, that is monstrous. Human nerves can hardly bear it.²⁹⁶

Oslavia has been ‘murdered’ through months of bombardment, attack and counter-attack, killing and the rotting of corpses. But Schalek might also have in mind another event, of dramatic proportions, that occurred on 17 April, just a few weeks before she penned this article. Further north, on the Dolomite front, an Italian artillery and mine attack had literally destroyed a mountaintop - the 2462 metre high peak of Col di Lana.

²⁹⁴ Cf.: Schindler: 2001, p. 113.

²⁹⁵ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

²⁹⁶ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

Col di Lana lay just to the southwest of Cortina and was held by the Austro-Hungarians. Its height and location gave them a commanding view of the northern Italian plains, and enabled Habsburg artillery spotters to direct artillery fire into Italian territory with considerable accuracy. The peak would have been difficult to storm without enormous losses, and it guarded the route up the Puster Valley into Austro-Hungarian Tyrol. During the night of 16 – 17 April, the garrison atop Col di Lana came under exceptionally heavy, focused Italian artillery fire. The shelling increased steadily in intensity until it reached the level of what the defenders called *Trommelfeuer* – ‘drum-fire.’ They sought desperately to shelter in their bunkers, but these began to collapse or suffocate them. After many hours of incessant shelling the Italian infantry began to storm the hill, and set off an enormous mine, which blew the top off the mountain. The mine had been set in a 1000 metre long tunnel that had taken three months to dig.²⁹⁷ Over 100 of the 250 defending troops were killed and the rest taken prisoner.²⁹⁸

The mountain had been ‘murdered.’ Schalek would have been incensed by the ‘death’ of both Oslavia and Col di Lana. Nevertheless she does not lay blame directly at the feet of the Italians. Rather, ‘our culture’ is the culprit. Her complaint is against war in general, or at least, the cultural weaknesses and developments that had led to this war. Once again, if she were setting out to be a propagandist she has missed a prime opportunity to slander the Italians. Her intention is clearly to lay the blame elsewhere.

Before enlarging on the scene of the devastation of Oslavia, Schalek describes the novel form of covered tracks that were used to move men and supplies up and down the mountain under cover:

[The track] was masked with so-called ‘barriers’ of plaited branches, lined and bedecked with twigs.²⁹⁹

It was the same system the Italians used, vividly described by Ernest Hemingway in *A farewell to arms*. Soldiers effectively fenced the path in with a wall of branches. The enemy could see the plaited walls, but never knew when someone was travelling along the tracks that were hidden behind them. Each side would shell the others’ tracks intermittently, so that travellers always had to negotiate ‘a maze of gaps, craters and bark,’³⁰⁰ but there was little danger of being caught by snipers or in a focused artillery attack.

As in many First World War battlefields, it was impossible for the thousands of corpses to lie buried and at peace. Shells would burst on graves and throw human remains around

²⁹⁷ The American educated, Italian engineer who designed the tunnel and oversaw the project, Dor. Gelsio Caetani, became something of a folk hero in Italy. See ‘Mountain blown up.’ *Times*, 20 April 1916.

²⁹⁸ A detailed description of this action may be found at <http://www.austro-hungarian-army.co.uk/battles/coldilan.htm>

²⁹⁹ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 3

³⁰⁰ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 3.

the area, and new trenches often ran into old graves. Schalek had been advised to take formalin with her to offset the stench – but she forgot. She laments:

But I'm sorry. For if anyone wants to tell the world at large how human beings dwell month after month under the dead, then he must have breathed in the same air they did – at least once.³⁰¹

Schalek earlier described the colour of the skin of a corpse: now she is reporting on the stench. This represented a level of honesty not often attained in World War I reporting in any country. Again one must ask how such a comment would have been viewed by the War Surveillance Unit and other authorities.

Schalek now relates her failure to come to a rational understanding of the fierce and tenacious fighting that had seen Oslavia change hands twice and turn into a scene of death. She confesses:

I'm tortured by the awareness that I'm too weak for this. The viciousness of the sight is without equal... I understand nothing; I fail to grasp it; I feel nothing. The crippling grey holds me in its claws. Oslavia, the dead mountain, gnaws my heart out of my body.³⁰²

Schalek knew the recapture of Oslavia had been achieved through a tenaciously hard and bloody string of battles (these were reported in the British press almost daily from October 1915 to January 1916). She tried to find out some of the details from the troops she met in the trenches, but no-one would talk about it. No doubt this was because of the extreme weariness and battle fatigue of the troops, for whom a mechanism of survival was to avoid recalling or thinking about the horrors they had been through and may have to face again tomorrow. She wondered how their attacks, 'right into the midst of the Italians, in full sight of the enemy and his throats of fire' could have been possible for human beings.³⁰³ She got no answer from the front line soldiers. The best response she got was from a high ranking officer in Gorizia:

Will you find words that are suitable for Oslavia? The heavy, monumental, and yet simple words that are big enough for Oslavia?³⁰⁴

Her dramatic reporting of the inability of front line soldiers to speak of their ordeal on Oslavia – albeit a victorious one – left it wide open to her readers to let their imagination run free. She had already spoken of an entire mountain wasted to the colour of death. Her readers were left to wonder what terrors must have been endured in that inferno.

Schalek then travelled to the divisional command in Biglia, south of Gorizia, and was quartered in the house of the Hungarian commander Lieutenant Field Marshall Gèzah

³⁰¹ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 3.

³⁰² Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 3.

³⁰³ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³⁰⁴ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 4.

Freiherr Lukachich von Smorja, 'who had held San Michele against the Italians with very little relief since the beginning of the Italian campaign.'³⁰⁵ Her tone changes in her first article from this period, reverting, to some degree, to patriotic assertions, descriptions of heroism, and prejudice against the Italians. One is led to wonder whether living closely to such an imposing representative of the empire tended to silence the freer, more critical thinking that she had been displaying.

Early in this article, for example, she reported hearing the story of a downed Italian aeroplane. Italian Chief of Staff Cadorna had apparently reported, 'it crashed due to causes unknown.'³⁰⁶ Schalek used this as an opportunity to criticise the Italian War Press Organisation:

And the whole Italian army looked on as it was shot down in flames. He [Cadorna] reported that a second aircraft returned home undamaged. Yet in our entire army not one eye had seen a second aircraft... What's the Italian army thinking, making such reports? They stir up feeling against us foreigners: does this enable them to get over the oppressive feeling that their high command is lying?³⁰⁷

It was in fact not unusual for official press reports to be wide of the truth. There are many reports of front line soldiers being amazed and bemused by the newspapers' versions of battles they had fought in. Of course, Schalek herself was part of a propaganda effort too, to a greater or lesser extent. While she had her own private agenda of making readers aware of the real suffering of the front line, she still took many opportunities to paint her own people as morally superior to their enemies.

She then turns to comment on the racial mix of Austro-Hungarian units on the Isonzo front. Lukachich and his units were Hungarian., while Borojevic was Croatian. She reflects:

Hungarians stand alongside Austrians on the Isonzo and the entire front is led by a Croatian. Each man gives his best and is proud of his sacrifice, and the united effort bears united fruit.³⁰⁸

She was full of praise for the Hungarians as not only true to their duty but also self-effacing and focused on their tasks. Again for Schalek, as a Jew, who benefited from the inter-racial tolerance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the integrated working together of Hungarian, Austrian and 'Croatian' units on the front was cause for celebration and a point she would want her readers to appreciate.

On her first day in Biglia Schalek made a tour of the Plateau of Doberdo. After a twelve hour journey she had 'covered only a tiny part of this mountain district.'³⁰⁹ She described

³⁰⁵ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Von Görz nach Doberdo, NFP, 31. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁰⁶ Schalek: Doberdo, NFP, 31. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁰⁷ Schalek: Doberdo, NFP, 31. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁰⁸ Schalek: Doberdo, NFP, 31. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

the view of the Isonzo battlefields in some detail for her readers³¹⁰ and, looking out towards Monte San Michele, she wondered how it was possible to defend this stretch of highland against the Italians – it was one of the most heavily contested regions on the Isonzo front. The Italians had taken it and held it briefly in the Second Battle of the Isonzo, but Austro-Hungarian troops had counter-attacked and regained it. Fierce battles were subsequently fought on the mountain, often resulting in just a few metres of territorial gain, with huge losses on both sides.³¹¹ Schalek visited the site and described it in her next article, ‘The most forward positions on Monte San Michele.’ Her tone now returns to the more factual, descriptive approach she had been developing earlier:

Not a boot’s width of this gigantic plateau is without metal fragments: hundreds of thousands of shrapnel balls, bomb fragments, grenade parts, mines, shell cases, detonators and shell tips lie strewn about. The most striking are the unexploded bombs... Somebody showed me a most unusual find: the impact hole of a shrapnel shell with the time delay fuse³¹² still in it.³¹³

Unlike the trenches and dugouts on Podgora and Oslavia, the positions on Monte San Michele were constructed ‘like a fortress’³¹⁴ from loose flat stones that were found on the site. Again noticing the work of non-combatant support troops, Schalek wondered at the ‘unspeakably death-defying work’³¹⁵ of building these stone defences, a work that could only be carried out at night out of sight of snipers, and that ‘deserves greater honour.’³¹⁶ She quickly saw how uncomfortable it was for the soldiers to live in this stony wilderness:

What heat these stones radiate! How many flies there are! Big, black blowflies that you vainly fight against with lime. And there are more than enough lice. And these reserve positions are of course still within range of rifle bullets.³¹⁷

This is one of the few times she mentions lice, one of the most persistent irritants of First World War soldiers on all fronts. For German troops, delousing was a regular event during their rotations from front line trenches to rear positions. Another constant problem was the shortage of water:

There’s no water anywhere on San Michele. It’s brought up in barrels, and each man gets only a certain ration a day – even in the full heat of summer. Every drop is dragged up daily in the sight of the enemy, through the line of fire.³¹⁸

³⁰⁹ Schalek: Doberdo, NFP, 31. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³¹⁰ Schalek: Doberdo, NFP, 31. Mai 1916 (MB), p. 3-4.

³¹¹ Cf.: Simčič 2003, p. 52-53.

³¹² ‘Zündröhre’- a device to detonate a shell with accurate timing so that it explodes just before landing.

³¹³ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Die vorderste Linie auf dem Monte San Michele, NFP, 21. June 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³¹⁴ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. June 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³¹⁵ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. June 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³¹⁶ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. June 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³¹⁷ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie auf dem Monte San Michele, in: Schalek: Am Isonzo, p. 101.

³¹⁸ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 2.

The heat, the insects, the scarcity of everyday essentials, on top of the strain of constant rifle fire and episodes of shelling, were taking their toll on the men. Schalek gives an honest account of their condition:

The shadows round their eyes, in the corners of their mouths, on their cheeks, are deep like wood carvings. For them the war is no sport, no adventure, no euphoria., not any more. They'd love to be free; they'd love to be home. These men have become old. Many a merry young lad is now a serious, ponderous old man. It's as if the youth has been washed from their eyes, and the high spirits of boyhood have vanished from their looks.³¹⁹

Schalek's view of the front line is now the complete opposite of what she wrote in her first war assignment in Tyrol, where war *was* sport and adventure, and there was certainly euphoria in her reflections. And unlike the 'heroes' she met a year earlier in Tyrol, these soldiers would love to go home.

But we may also wonder that such an honest description of the battle fatigue of the soldiers was allowed to be published, as it could possibly give the Italians an indication of how weak and near to collapse the Austro-Hungarian defenders were. The hill positions defending Gorizia – Monte San Michele, Oslavia, Podgora and Monte Sabotino – had been under fierce, prolonged attack on and off for over six months. The fighting there was desperate and almost incessant. Positions on the hills had changed hands many times, and often thousands of soldiers were lost for the gain of a few metres. For the Italians, too, the names of these hills had become symbols. The London *Times* reported:

Sabotino, Podgora, Monte San Michele, Oslavia – what Italian can hear these names calmly? What infinite memories of struggle and sacrifice each represents.³²⁰

Schalek's article on San Michele was published on 21 June. Six weeks later the Italians launched a series of battles in which they took all these positions, and Gorizia itself, from the Austro-Hungarians. A thoughtful general might have been concerned that Schalek's descriptions of battle fatigue could be used as part of the Italian intelligence gathering that might help confirm their decision to attack in force. Indeed, even her comments about the traumatised silence of the men defending Podgora could be used in the same way. But then, how does a war correspondent tell the truth, without giving aid and comfort to the enemy?

Despite criticism of her war reporting on the home front, Schalek maintained that her approach was appreciated by the troops. She was sought after and made welcome on the front, she said, and the soldiers were more than pleased to have her present. She quotes one officer:

³¹⁹ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³²⁰ 'Heavy blow to Austria. Isonzo defences swept away.' *Times*, 9 August 1916, p. 7.

No-one should make light of the Hungarian loyalty and bravery. We don't boast about it, we never demanded acclaim. We held San Michele without song and dance. But we're pleased that now someone's here who'll describe what's happened. All the troops are glad about it.³²¹

However, Schalek found herself inadequate for the task of conveying the everyday realities of the soldiers' lives to her readers. She comments:

It seems more and more hopeless to attempt to describe this through my own experience. A reporter sees it, but doesn't suffer it. And between these two expressions lies the war.³²²

This gives a hint of an idea that Schalek was later to promote: that the war is able to continue only because people on the home front are not experiencing the suffering of the front line. If only the people could see it and feel it, they would stop it. She wants her readers to be aware that, whatever words and phrases she uses to describe the soldiers' suffering, she will still not have got the full message across. There is, for example the psychological strain, 'that no-one can possibly understand'³²³ unless they were present in the battles. She explains:

The horror of the defence doesn't lie so much in the danger, but in the endlessness, in the wearing out of all their nerves, in the killing off of all human challenge, in the necessity, day and night- even though they're filthy and with limbs that are as broken – to keep themselves constantly at the highest level of tension.³²⁴

One reason for the extreme state of tension was the '*Minenkrieg*,' the mine war constantly being waged *underneath* the trenches. Each side would dig tunnels under the other's lines, plant high explosives in strategic places and detonate them. Often whole embankments would disappear into the earth, taking hundreds of soldiers with them. The mine war on the Isonzo began with an attack on San Martino and escalated into a tit-for-tat struggle during the spring of 1916.³²⁵ Almost every day, Schalek said, one of the Italians would 'blow himself up with his own mine.'³²⁶ The Hungarian sappers, too, fell victim to their own errors in this underground war. 'Every day,' she declared, 'the unstable rocks of San Michele bury some heroic man.'³²⁷ Schalek appealed to her readers:

We must never let it slip from our consciousness that only the strong heart of these men – nothing else – is saving Austria-Hungary in the face of the enemy.

³²¹ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 3.

³²² Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³²³ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³²⁴ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 2.. 4.

³²⁵ Cf.: Schaumann 1993, p. 120.

³²⁶ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³²⁷ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 4.

Only the weak heart of our dithering opponent – nothing else – keeps him from victory.³²⁸

To readers who did not accept the stereotype of the weak-nerved Italian, this would not be very comforting. Implicit in it is an admission that the Italians' equipment and their rate of troop replacement have now far surpassed that of the Austro-Hungarians. She continues:

Only in the night can you creep through the communication trenches to these positions. As if abandoned, they lay under the eyes of the enemy in a terrain where not one centimetre of earth is left 'unploughed.' I see the new foxholes that our soldiers took. There, without trenches or body armour, the conqueror is under constant enemy fire.³²⁹

Schalek has had a very rare experience for a First World War journalist: she has been allowed into the forward positions of a hotly contested part of the front that is constantly changing hands. Further, she has been allowed to report openly on her experience. Despite her continued stereotyping of the enemy, despite the dulling influence the presence of generals tends to have on her writing, despite the rules of the War Press Office and the censorship requirements of the War Surveillance Unit, truth is getting through to her readers. The men are still heroic but they are exhausted, desperate, aged before their time.

But things would get more gruesome: she was about to experience '*Trommelfeuer*,' the chilling, mind-numbing spectre of a focused, persistent artillery bombardment.

³²⁸ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. Juni 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³²⁹ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. June 1916 (MB), p. 5.

Chapter Nine A hard rain: Living and dying under shellfire

While Alice Schalek was visiting forward positions on Monte San Michele, the Austro-Hungarian forces in that sector opened up a massive artillery barrage on nearby Italian lines. It persisted for hours and had the focused, earth-shattering intensity German-speaking soldiers called *'Trommelfeuer.'* It was a mind-numbing experience for Schalek, and from the report she wrote, it seems she was also caught in the return fire. It was very rare for any journalist in the First World War to be as close to the action as this,³³⁰ and Schalek wrote quite freely of her thoughts and feelings during the barrage. Her underlying theme was the way one's reaction to danger and carnage becomes relativised in a battle zone:

You're often astonished at how quickly you get desensitised to this. If you live in Gorizia, every incoming shell rails against your nerves. But when you're on San Michele and you hear the thunder of artillery fire in the distance, during the pauses in the fighting up here, you find yourself saying, with a sense of relief, 'Ah, it's just shells landing in Gorizia.' ...One of the reasons this war is able to continue is that for every kilometre of distance, your opinion about it changes.³³¹

It was not unusual for Gorizia to take over a hundred shells a day.³³² While it should be scandalous that a civilian population centre was being so brutally bombed, it tended to fade into insignificance in relation to the massive bombardments the soldiers were being subjected to in their forward defensive positions. Yet even here there are degrees of intensity:

Up on the ridge of San Michele every man knows it's even worse on the North Slope. And that steels him a little: he almost sees his own lot as privileged.³³³

Extending this principle – the further you are from the worst artillery barrages the more acceptable you find the war – Schalek aims a criticism at Italian Prime Minister Salandra³³⁴ for losing touch with the reality of the war:

Salandra, you there in Rome, how many kilometres are you from here? Your people no longer have any barricades, no body armour, no cover. If you were here, Salandra, you'd see how the Italian heads fly about in the air. You've never seen it yourself, otherwise you'd know that your landsmen cannot endure these thunderous barrages.³³⁵

³³⁰ See the discussion on the extremely strict rules for British war correspondents, in Knightly, 1975, pp 80-112, and Matthews, 1957, pp. 155-173.

³³¹ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Trommelfeuer auf dem Monte San Michele, NFP, 5. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 2.

³³² See, for example, 'The Fight for Gorizia,' in *The Times* 23 November 1915, p. 8.

³³³ Ebenda, S. 3.

³³⁴ Antonio Salandra (1853-1931) served as Italy's Prime Minister from the outbreak of war in Europe until his resignation two years later following military defeat at the Trentino in May 1916.

³³⁵ Schalek: Trommelfeuer, NFP, 5. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 3.

Ostensibly this is aimed at the Italian government. But it could just as easily apply to the Habsburg rulers who sat far away from the action in Vienna and Budapest. They, too, should know that their own soldiers could not endure *Trommelfeuer*. It is no coincidence that in the same article Schalek gives a vivid description of her own side's soldiers cowering under such a barrage:

And now you think to yourself that it's dark, that you're in clammy clothes and you haven't slept, and that hour after hour, night after night it's been seething all around you. And that's what our troops lived through on Monte San Michele every day during the Fifth Battle.³³⁶ We had it every day about the same as this bunch of Italians are getting it now.³³⁷

The subtlety would not be lost on thoughtful readers: Italian heads are now 'flying about in the air,' implying that Austro-Hungarians heads were doing the same 'on Monte San Michele every day during the Fifth Battle.' Schalek indirectly reports on the carnage among Austria-Hungary's own troops. And what effect did such trauma have on a soldier who survived it?

If he returned home, he'd fall silent. He'd go dumb, while another talks – one who hasn't lain two years long in the line of fire.³³⁸ So now I warn the listener: change your values; don't pass by the silent ones casually.³³⁹

Despite her bold appeals to both the Italian prime Minister and the Habsburg civilian far from the dangers of the war zone, Schalek confesses that what she is seeing is beyond her comprehension:

I stand in the midst of this, but I know nothing about it; nothing, nothing.³⁴⁰

Schalek felt despair that she would never be able to convey the true horror of the scene to her readers. She feared

that we'll never see an end to war if the world doesn't see it, if the Salandras don't know, ... if the enormity of this horror – which is just what the Isonzo is – remains forever hidden.³⁴¹

She feared that it would indeed remain hidden, because:

³³⁶ The Fifth battle of the Isonzo took place in April 1916, during Schalek's first few weeks on the front.

³³⁷ Ebenda, S. 4.

³³⁸ German *Schwarmlinie* - the lines of troops waiting to repel infantry charges and to respond in kind.

³³⁹ Schalek: *Trommelfeuer*, NFP, 5. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 3-4.

³⁴⁰ Ebenda, S. 4

³⁴¹ Ebenda, S. 4.

To be sure, the name of Monte San Michele does have a chilling ring to it. But just a few dozen kilometres from here nobody knows what this name really sums up.³⁴²

We sense the frustration in Schalek as she tries to get the terrible message across, yet at the same time is full of doubts as to whether the written word can achieve that goal. We also see a de-politicisation of the war in this article. It is not only Salandra who should witness the carnage of the battlefield, but *'the Salandras'* - the leaders of all the warring nations. And not only the politicians, but the 'whole world' needs to see it, or war itself will never be brought to an end.

Amazingly, a first World War correspondent is painting vivid pictures of battlefield horrors, appealing to national leaders to come and see it for themselves, and calling for an end to war. Predictably, her article provoked an angry reaction when it appeared in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 5 July. Five days later an anonymous editorialist in the *Wiener Sonn- und Montagszeitung* (Vienna Sunday and Monday News) wrote:

This female war correspondent doubtless belongs to the unfortunate side-effects of this unfortunate war... There's no doubt her outlook is distorted by hysteria and psychosis! That's what has led to these commentaries of unprintable ignorance and eccentricity. It's partly what she's genuinely experienced, partly auto-suggestion – which is in any case what newspaper literature consists of.³⁴³

We may wonder who this anonymous critic is. The last comment is reminiscent of Karl Kraus's view of newspaper articles, and Kraus would also have seen the war as 'unfortunate,' at the very least. He also had an uncompromisingly purist view of what 'the truth' consisted of, so that, even if Schalek had written ten times as much in condemnation of war, a single statement of the heroism of the troops or of justification for their defensive stance would have damned her in his eyes. The critique continues:

Because she hasn't a clue how to report the facts, she dishes out unbridled stupidity and doses of her own philosophy. All measured judgements and logical patterns of thought - that have been arrived at by sensible minds – are thrown out the window.³⁴⁴

The writer concludes:

Reading her article makes your hair stand on end. Finally you're reduced to helpless anger that she trivialises this human catastrophe, solely to tickle her own vanity. You're led to say that such a creature must be stark raving mad!³⁴⁵

³⁴² Ebenda, S. 5.

³⁴³ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Wiener Sonn- und Montagszeitung.

³⁴⁴ Ebenda.

³⁴⁵ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Wiener Sonn- und Montagszeitung.

If this was Kraus's work, it is unfortunate that he was not able to see the development in Schalek's war journalism, from the pure jingoistic patriotism of her early writings, to the pained, honest critique of war she was now working towards – albeit still mixed with pro-Habsburg and anti-Italian prejudices. Her article on *Trommelfeuer* came far closer to the truth than any British war correspondent's wartime publications ever did (they saved the truth for post-war articles and books, while they happily received their knighthoods for wartime services to King and Country). Schalek's reports of mid-1916 may well represent the most honest published war reporting of any of the belligerents' correspondents at that stage of the war. It is no wonder forces began to gather against her.

The usual month-long delay before her articles were published meant that Schalek would not hear of this criticism until after her next few reports had been written and despatched. The following report in the series continued her account of the Hungarian soldiers, the '*Honveds*,' on Monte San Michele.

As Schalek moved about the front, saw the medic trains that were carrying the previous night's wounded, every morning, to hospital. She wrote:

The badly wounded lie half suspended on wagons, strapped on by belts stretched across them. Those who are lightly wounded manage to hold themselves steady enough to salute.³⁴⁶ Others can see faintly and try to ride with their hand on their cap. But many lie motionless. With their cloaks pulled up over their faces they see and hear nothing. Further up the hill we meet those who have 'only' a bullet in the arm, a grenade fragment in the hand. They stagger away slowly, while the night's shooting still hasn't ended.³⁴⁷

Schalek reports that she was deeply moved by the sight of the wounded and the reaction of the officers to the *Verwundetenzüge* – the 'trains for the wounded.' The trains had been carrying away their sad human cargo 'every day, like this, for a year,' yet 'no-one had got used to it.'³⁴⁸ Even battle hardened officers found it difficult to bear.

The sheer numbers of wounded would have had a macabre effect on observers. Though accounts vary,³⁴⁹ we can estimate that Austria-Hungary suffered about half a million wounded soldiers on the Isonzo front alone in two and a half years of fighting (quite apart from those who died at the front). This is an average of over 500 a day – which explains why there was a daily train service to take them away. One wonders what kind of hospital system would have been adequate to cope with such a deluge. Hospitals and convalescent homes sprang up all over the empire, as they did in France, Germany and Russia. There was a chronic shortage of doctors, nurses, orderlies, beds, bandages, medicines and pain killers. In the Central Powers, cotton was in such short supply that paper bandages were issued. Of course, the news of these gargantuan numbers was withheld from the public.

³⁴⁶ Presumably they saluted because, whenever they saw Schalek, she was accompanied by an officer.

³⁴⁷ Schalek, Alice: *Bei der Isonzoarmee. Bei den Honveds auf dem Monte San Michele*, NFP, 11. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 1-2.

³⁴⁸ *Ebenda*, S. 2.

³⁴⁹ See, for example, estimates in Keegan, 1999, p. 452 ff, and the discussion in Knightly, 1975, pp. 79-112.

But Schalek is letting her readers know: it is a *daily* delivery and it is so big it has to be carried on a *train*.

The nature of the injuries was also mind-numbing. As Schalek points out, bullet wounds and grenade fragments were minor cases (though even these could be fatal or maiming). It was the shelling that tore human bodies apart. Most First World War injuries were caused by high explosive shells. A British chaplain wrote in his diary (not published, apparently, until after the war):

It is a good thing not to be squeamish... As usual with a good many deaths, one had the back of his head off, another from the nose downward completely gone. But it is the multiple wounds that appear worst, men almost in pieces, the number intensifies the horror, we get so few slight cases.³⁵⁰

As in her earlier report from a field hospital, Schalek refrained from describing the soldiers' wounds in detail – or perhaps her descriptions did not pass the censor. There are only hints as to how bad the injuries are.

Instead, she shifts gear and praises once again the courage of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, predicting they would win the war because 'moral right' was on their side, while the Italians were done for because they had 'betrayed trust.'³⁵¹ She also notes the sharp focus of rising antipathy the Austro-Hungarian soldiers had for the Italians:

I can't believe that victory over the French or Russians will raise a laugh among the fighters. It's only towards the Italians that they feel this malice.³⁵²

Schalek also noted how tortured the soldiers were by their memories of the five great battles of the Isonzo. One officer told her:

At last a week has gone by when I haven't thought about it. At first I couldn't shake free of the memories, not even in my sleep.³⁵³

Even a military cemetery on Monte San Michele was caught in the shooting:

There's nothing more disturbing than this cemetery of heroes that the bullets are constantly whizzing over. Here, crammed close together, lie the defenders of the plateau, and even in death they have no peace.³⁵⁴

The sheer numbers of dead soldiers made it impractical to take all the bodies away for burial. Deaths on the front line were occurring at about half the rate of injuries. Hundreds of thousands were never even buried, and when they were, a 'cemetery' was often no

³⁵⁰ Quoted in De Groot, 2001, p. 174.

³⁵¹ Ebenda, S. 2.

³⁵² Schalek: In den unerlösten Gebieten, NFP, 17. August 1915 (MB), S. 3.

³⁵³ Schalek: Bei den Honveds, NFP, 11. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 3.

³⁵⁴ Schalek, Alice: Bei den Honveds auf dem Monte San Michele, in: Schalek: Am Isonzo, S. 137-138.

more than a series of holes in the ground, each filled up with bodies and body parts. Subsequent shelling often tore these resting places apart and scattered the remains once more. But perhaps this particular comment of Schalek's was not acceptable to the press censor: it was omitted in the newspaper version of her article and appeared only in the book version.

Schalek then visited the soldiers defending the 'fiercely contested' front on San Martino del Carso, which, she told her readers, 'lies embedded in a rock fold of the plateau, hard up against the slope of Monte San Michele.'³⁵⁵ Here she was confronted with the spectacle of each side's trenches lying within metres of each other, where repeated attacks and counter attacks left countless corpses in no-man's-land, and burial was impossible. She reports:

Completely mummified corpses, riddled with holes, have lain here between the lines for eight to ten months. Woe to anyone who would attempt to bury them!³⁵⁶

Yet as she made her way through the communication trenches and channels she noticed, once again, the signs of spring, and the striking contrast this made with the signs of war:

And at the same time the sun is shining on the scene in spring's full splendour. Everywhere there's quietness and peace. Only my companions know the dangerous openings in the channels...³⁵⁷

In the forward trenches, she said, the soldiers lived 'in uninterrupted view of the enemy.'³⁵⁸ The trenches were 'nowhere further from each other than forty paces, and in most places only twenty or even ten.'³⁵⁹

On a front line where the enemy was so close, the underground war of mines was rampant. Schalek comments:

The mine war, that the enemy started, is now pursued by us, and with real resolve, not only in defence but also in attack.³⁶⁰

She noted that the most recent mine had been set and exploded by the Austro-Hungarians, and that it had been 'right on target.'³⁶¹ She interpreted this success as a sign of Austro-Hungarian superiority and claimed this was due to their being in the right, while the Italians were morally weakened by being in the wrong, and therefore militarily weakened:

³⁵⁵ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Nach San Martino del Carso, NFP, 13. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 1.

³⁵⁶ Ebenda, S. 2.

³⁵⁷ Ebenda, S. 2.

³⁵⁸ Ebenda, S. 2.

³⁵⁹ Ebenda, S. 2.

³⁶⁰ Ebenda, S. 4.

³⁶¹ Ebenda, S. 4.

A sense of hopelessness has slowly gripped the Italians. It's tragic. They too are willing to make sacrifices; they too are bleeding to death here; they too hold out monstrosly. All they lack is the last thing – the very last – which gives us a decisive advantage, and that their Fatherland cannot give them: the belief that they are in the right.³⁶²

This is a classic example of Schalek's skill in revealing the truth about her own side's troops by weaving it into a passage that is ostensibly entirely patriotic. No doubt she did believe her own side was in the right. But it is noteworthy that she does not say, of the Italians, 'they are bleeding to death here.' Rather, she says 'they *too* are bleeding to death here.' She has effectively published her opinion that her own side's troops are bleeding to death. By mid-1916 that is exactly what was happening to the Austro-Hungarian forces. They had long ago been crippled as an independent fighting force. Now their condition was terminal. They could only keep going because they were propped up by the Germans – and eighteen months later the Germans, too, would be bleeding to death. Schalek probably did not know how bad the situation was throughout the Habsburg armies. But she could see it in microcosm in the hospital trains, the multitudes of corpses, and the looks on the faces of the men in the front line trenches – despite the fact that the defence of the Isonzo was far and away Austria-Hungary's most successful campaign.

As Schalek returned to her lodgings via the village of San Martino her attention was caught by the monstrous degree of destruction:

Over all the grief, all the pity, far above the terrestrial, the scene metamorphoses into a grandiose painting. Strange ghostly silhouettes are all that's left of the houses. Here stands a corner, towering vertically upward, all that's left of a three storey building. There - all that's left of another building - stands a window wall. Black lines draw themselves grotesquely against the sunny sky, a creation of the most hellish, most imaginative fantasy.³⁶³

There is perhaps a form of 'dissociation' in Schalek's response here. The village lies in ruins; the destruction is almost total. Fantasising about it as a work of grotesque art is one way of coping with it. But the message to her readers is nevertheless clear: the war is shattering people's homes – just as it is shattering their bodies.

We see a similar dissociation in her reflections on the Plateau of Doberdo, which she saw the next day while visiting Monte Cosich, in the south of the Isonzo front:

Shivering with awe, you carry its silhouette deep in your soul. Anyone who's ever seen this mountain landscape in war will never forget it. Parched, rocky, graceless, full of tangled undergrowth that blocks your path, widely visible to the enemy, comfortless in the dust of the summer sun, seething in the mud of the

³⁶² Schalek: San Martino, NFP, 13. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 3.

³⁶³ Ebenda, S. 4.

rainy season, shattered, laid waste by a hundred thousand shells – yet it touches you as holy and sublime.³⁶⁴

Presumably the landscape was ‘holy and sublime’ (*‘heilig und hehr’*) because the blood of so many soldiers had been spilled there – in the same way that the beaches of Normandy are sacred to many British, Americans and Canadians, and Gallipoli is to many Australians and New Zealanders.

The soldiers on Monte Cosich were a *Landsturmregiment*, roughly the equivalent of a British Home Guard unit. These men were between 33 and 42 years old, and usually not as well armed and equipped as other troops.³⁶⁵ Schalek says of them:

Deep thoughtfulness and life-experience grows on their faces, with a glad pride in the self-mastery they have wrung from their achievements.³⁶⁶

Schalek reflected on how well these older men now blended with the young soldiers, the twenty year old conscripts, of whom she said:

After these years, with almost the wisdom of age, with eyes that have become knowing, they stare death in the face. War has wiped away the boundaries in human life. The grey haired and soft bearded are comrades. All die together among the same shells, among the same rocks.³⁶⁷

Not only were the different age groups working together in unity on the Isonzo front, the national groups within the empire were too. Schalek comments on this unity, with an irony she might not have been aware of:

Our Isonzo defence must be a role model for the future reconciliation of all peoples.³⁶⁸

The irony continues in her closing reflections on her visits in the Biglia area of the front. As she left the divisional command centre she wrote:

Our youth fades away on the plateau. Our brothers bleed to death here, our fathers breathe their last breath in the gladness of their achievements. But in this most bloody school we’ve learnt order: Obedience: sacrifice and duty. The new Austria-Hungary is born on this plateau.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁴ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Zum Monte Cosich, dem südlichen Frontpfeiler an der Adria, NFP, 20. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 1.

³⁶⁵ vgl.: Schaumann Walter/Schubert, Peter: Süd-West-Front. Österreich-Ungarn und Italien 1915-1918, Wien 1992, S. 101.

³⁶⁶ Schalek: Monte Cosich, NFP, 20. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 3.

³⁶⁷ Ebenda, S. 3.

³⁶⁸ Schalek: Monte Cosich, NFP, 20. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 3.

³⁶⁹ Schalek: Monte Cosich, NFP, 20. Juli 1916 (MB), S. 4.

The theme of a great new order coming out of war was prevalent in Austria prior to the war, and there were various versions of it.³⁷⁰ Schalek's recurring theme was that Austria-Hungary was too disorganised, too inefficient, and too little focused on harnessing human resources effectively to reap the benefits of industrialisation. She is now seeing these values becoming manifest on the front line, and looks forward to 'the new Austria-Hungary' being built on them. But the cost is awful: youth fading away, old and young dying together, men bleeding to death.

The future would not be kind to her hopes. Within months the front line positions she had visited would be overrun by the Italians, and Gorizia itself would fall into their hands. She was right in her assessment of the Austro-Hungarian troops: they were bleeding to death and falling prey to sheer exhaustion. And as she must have known, the manifestations of racial harmony and tolerance that were being shown within the fighting forces were certainly not being mirrored on the home front. Things were going in the opposite direction. The empire was slowly and inexorably tearing itself apart from within.

³⁷⁰ Vgl.: Mommsen: Einleitung, in: Mommsen (Hrsg.): Kultur und Krieg, S. 1-7.

Chapter Ten: Hell freezes over: Schalek on the northern Isonzo front

From what we have seen so far, as a war correspondent in the First World War Alice Schalek was unique. We know of no other correspondent of any of the warring nations who went as far as Schalek in reporting the realities of the front line. Not only did she visit and observe forward positions while hostilities were taking place, she also wrote frankly of the stresses and terrors of the combat soldiers' everyday existence, questioned the policies of both her enemy's government and her own (though obliquely in the latter case), and succeeded in getting these reports published in the most highly regarded newspaper in her country's imperial capital. Historical accounts of First World War correspondents paint a sorry picture of these keen but generally ineffective and often frustrated men and (a few) women, most of whom were never allowed near a front line trench, let alone one under fire. Even when they made it to the firing line, they were either forced to keep quiet about the ugliness of it, or suffered the snip of the censor.

There is no doubt that many editorial staff in the countries of the Entente had a fairly good idea of what was actually happening in the trenches. Correspondents of *The Times*, for example, regularly read *Die Neue Freie Presse* and quoted Austrian newspaper reports of the war, from both this and other dailies.³⁷¹ Even if British reporters were not seeing hell on the battlefield, some of them were reading about it in Schalek's articles. Yet they did not quote it, nor even refer to it. On the one hand, it might have been a propaganda coup for the British to show how severely the Habsburg soldiers were suffering on the Isonzo. Yet on the other hand, this would also have revealed how ghastly life had become in front line trenches in general. It would also have led critical British readers to ask why their own reporters were not keeping them informed of such truths. So the conspiracy of silence continued. It is a pity that Alice Schalek is not known to First World War historians in the English speaking world, as this would give an added dimension to their comments on propaganda, censorship and the press during the four years of war. We find no reference to Schalek in any of the standard English histories of the First World War. The only discussion of her wartime work we have found in English is in an essay on Austrian culture in the first World War,³⁷² but here the author's picture of her is constructed from Karl Kraus's caricature, rather than from any textual reference to her actual work.

By late May 1916, four main themes had become dominant in Schalek's reporting:

1. The war is so monstrous as to defy comprehension.
2. Austria-Hungary is being forced to fight it because of the aggression of its neighbours.

³⁷¹ For example, 'No rest for the Austrians,' *The Times*, 27 August 1917, claims to be a report from the *Neue Freie Presse*.

³⁷² Beller, 1999, pp. 127-161.

3. If people on the home front (in all the warring nations, Austria-Hungary included) could see how terrible the front line was, they would quickly find a way to put a stop to it.
4. The Austro-Hungarian soldier is heroic, and is all that stands between Austria-Hungary's valued way of life and its destruction.

The second and fourth themes would have been regarded as legitimate within the Austro-Hungarian propaganda effort, while the third would have been less acceptable and the first extremely controversial. An English or French reporter for a mainstream newspaper would not have got away with these at all.

Schalek never set out to give a detached, objective account of the war. As a travel writer her art was to report her personal feelings and impressions in response to the facts, as much as the facts themselves. In her reports from the northern sectors of the Isonzo front in late May and early June 1916 (published in the *Neue freie Presse* in June, July and early August) her personal response to what she saw was as strong as the bitterness of the sights themselves.

The first of these dealt with front line trenches on the hill of Plava, north of Gorizia.³⁷³ Once again she confessed her fear that she 'would not be able to convey the real picture of the bloody hill.'³⁷⁴ To begin with, she said, Plava was a salient jutting out into Italian held territory, and therefore:

The whole misery of this awful fortification lies in its three-sided outlook. It's coming under fire from so many sides.³⁷⁵

In addition, the everyday existence of the soldiers was gruesome. In Schalek's words:

The dead and the living, fresh food and waste, are so closely shoved together that there's no outlet for the smells. They've sent thousands of bottles of scent up the hill – it's like trying to dry up the ocean with blotting paper. In moments when it's quiet on the front – though it still puts them in mortal danger – they can bury some of it with lime, or carry some away. But when the shooting starts it just has to remain where it is.³⁷⁶

Despite the danger of continual rifle and shell fire, Schalek made a thorough tour of the trenches and was able to offer the kind of details that other war correspondents' reports lacked. She was determined, she said, to bring her people on the home front face to face with realities such as the following:

'Put gloves on,' says my companion when he sees me touch the walls of the trench. I don't have any with me, but I know what he means. I'll remember the

³⁷³ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Die Kote von Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB).

³⁷⁴ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 1.

³⁷⁵ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 3.

³⁷⁶ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 3.

stench of corpses my whole life long. It's like no other smell from the ground. On account of the contamination of the ground by these corpses I'm lent an oversized pair of gloves. I feel strange in them. They belong to brave, enduring, dependable hands.³⁷⁷

In this passage we see, once again, Schalek's skill of weaving a horror story seamlessly into a report of a loyal, brave Austro-Hungarian soldier. It would have been impossible for a censor to retain the words of praise for the soldier, without also retaining the remarks about the corpses that one might be contaminated by, in feeling one's way along the trenches.

In places the only safe way to move from trench to trench was in tunnels, and this in unbearable heat. While digging one such tunnel the men had accidentally dug into a mass grave, and released 'the repulsive, sickly-sweet smell' into the air.³⁷⁸ Living with the rotting corpses of their compatriots was a regular feature of front line life in the First World War, and Schalek was determined to convey a sense of it to her readers.

As she left the position she encountered supply troops bringing up provisions. Again she expressed her admiration for their humble, plodding and uncomplaining work, and declared that they deserved a special memorial:

If I were a painter I'd hold on to this picture. The silhouettes of the men who carry the food cans. Black in black. The steep, narrow communication trenches. The rocks on the ground. Between them the carriers. With mouths firmly shut. No number of lines would be too many for the painting. And it would have to be a work of art that made posterity quiver.³⁷⁹

From a vantage point on Plava Schalek was able to view the shattered village of Zagora, the subject of her next report.³⁸⁰ Austro-Hungarian positions on this low-lying region on the banks of the Isonzo could only be reached safely at night, as it lay in full view of the Italians. The Austro-Hungarians, she said, named the route to the village 'the death-road to Zagora.'³⁸¹ 'The battle line,' she explained, 'runs right through the middle of the village.'³⁸² She continued:

The war surpasses itself again and again. Yes, there's war over half of Europe. Thousands upon thousands are tearing each other apart, limb from limb. Men are dying, becoming crippled or blind. But no death is more graphic, no maiming more horrifying, no dismay more terrible, than this twelve month long defence of Zagora.³⁸³

³⁷⁷ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁷⁸ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³⁷⁹ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³⁸⁰ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 1.

³⁸¹ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁸² Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁸³ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 1.

Schalek believed the battle of Zagora had reached a new dimension in bloodshed. Not only were shrapnel shells, high explosive shells and bullets used, but ‘mortars are at work day and night.’³⁸⁴ Some of these contained ‘45 kilograms of ecrasite.’³⁸⁵ Ecrasite is a high explosive developed in Austria-Hungary around 1890. It is about seventy-five times as powerful per kilogram as dynamite, yet is completely safe to handle. A bombshell containing 45 kilograms of it would have the explosive power of four tonnes of dynamite.

Mortars were a particularly fearful development because they were fired at fairly close range, in a near vertical trajectory so that the shell could land in trenches and dugouts more effectively. Some mortars were of huge calibre. Schalek’s horrified response is appropriate, as at this stage in the war both sides were racing against each other to develop new and more violent means of destruction. As war historian David Stevenson points out, in this middle period of the war, gas, tanks, bomber aircraft and, in particular, more accurate artillery with higher explosive power were notching up the killing power of each side’s armoury.³⁸⁶

Mortars caused horrific injuries. Again Schalek feared that the truth of such horrors would never be known by the world at large, for:

... the moral impression of this ear-splitting racket is so dreadful that people will fail to grasp how the men have stayed sane – if indeed news of it ever gets out.³⁸⁷

How did the men stay sane? Schalek frequently wonders at this question. Many soldiers did not, of course, and armies of all the belligerents suffered epidemics of shell-shock. Among those who held their composure throughout, many suffered a lifetime of post-traumatic stress when the war was over. But Schalek was right to be amazed at how well the large majority of the men held together under such torturous conditions, and her question is still asked today by historians.³⁸⁸

To complete the picture of horrors, Schalek focuses her attention on the sight of a single corpse:

There’s one standing upright over there, leaning against a tree. From a distance you’d think he’s deep in thought, looking out over the land. He has his cap on his head, his pack on his shoulders. But he’s really just a skeleton. It looks so gruesome.³⁸⁹

As in many First World War battle zones, opposing trenches were often so close and hostilities so persistent that it was impossible to bury the dead. The stench, the grisly

³⁸⁴ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁸⁵ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁸⁶ Stevenson, 2004, pp. 179-197.

³⁸⁷ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁸⁸ An engaging discussion on this topic can be found in Stevenson, 2004, pp. 198-218.

³⁸⁹ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

sights (and the rats and the maggots, which Schalek's reports do not mention) were part of the soldier's everyday existence.

Yet Schalek found that the men were still able to laugh. During a celebration of the first full year of the defence of Plava, she was surprised by 'the loud and relaxed atmosphere'³⁹⁰ that stopped only briefly when a company passed through on their way to relieve troops at Zagora. She commented on the festivities with a grim irony:

There's a festive mood. The men are laughing again. They've been on the Isonzo front for twelve months. I've been here only three. That's long enough to unlearn normal laughter, but not long enough to learn to laugh at misery.³⁹¹

It seemed macabre that these men could make jokes 'about misery.' But they did. Their black humour was in some measure a mechanism of survival.

Schalek's last station in her May-June visit to the Isonzo front was Kneza, at the north end of the region, where she was quartered with Colonel-General Stöger-Steiner von Steinstätten, who became Minister of War in April 1917 (see Chapter 15). From here she visited Tolmein, the Schlossberg, and front line positions at Krn, Mrzli Brh and Bodil Brh. Her first report from this tour, 'An attack on the Tolmeiner Bridge,'³⁹² written in late May, was published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 10 August (by which time Italian troops were overrunning the positions around Gorizia that Schalek had visited earlier³⁹³).

Tolmein was under constant artillery fire when she arrived there, and her visit was reminiscent of her time in Gorizia. She reported that during her long stay on the Isonzo front she had become used to bomb-damaged towns and sporadic shelling, so that, she said, her reports would not have the edge of one who 'has arrived fresh from the capital, where clean and scrubbed people amuse themselves at the theatre.'³⁹⁴ Instead, she was now finding it 'quite acceptable to sleep in sandbag-bolstered houses where shells hit only now and then.'³⁹⁵

After giving her readers a detailed account of the geography of this part of the front,³⁹⁶ Schalek reported her personal reactions to a battle that broke out. From an observation point near Tolmein she looked out at a large Austro-Hungarian offensive that was an attempt to destroy Italian forward positions near the area. Although she saw herself as somewhat used to being in battle zones, the scene gave her an overwhelming impression of the senselessness of the war. She spoke out in condemnation of it:

³⁹⁰ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³⁹¹ Schalek: Zagora, NFP, 5. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

³⁹² Cf.: ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Lebenslauf von Alice Schalek.

³⁹³ Gorizia was taken by Italian forces during the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo (4.-15. August 1916). The Austro-Hungarians were also forced to abandon San Michele, Podgora und Oslavija. Cf.: Simčič: 2003, p. 84.

³⁹⁴ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Ein Angriff auf die Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August (MB), p. 2.

³⁹⁵ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

³⁹⁶ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

No, war is nothing natural, nothing organic, nothing necessary. Woe to him, three times woe, to him who thinks otherwise.³⁹⁷

She then turned her thoughts to the foot-soldiers who were about to go into battle:

Some of them have only two hours left to live. What are they thinking now? What are they feeling? While I was eating and chatting, they were standing there in position. Ready to charge. Waiting. And every day, every day men like these stand waiting, not knowing if their hearts will beat for two hours more. And at the same time, thousands each day are eating, chatting, driving cars. It's theatre time. People are laughing now in all the theatres and playhouses of Europe.³⁹⁸

Again she was pained by the indifference of those on the home front. And this, to her, made the war even more senseless, as, in her view, it was for the security of these people that the men on the Isonzo were fighting. If only they could actually see what the soldiers were suffering:

It's about seeing. It's about being there. The one man you see dying clutches deeper at your heart than the thousands you hear about.³⁹⁹

Having made her general protest about the war and her criticism of the indifferent attitude of people on the home front, Schalek returns to her more patriotic themes. After the battle she was able to visit some of the Austro-Hungarian trenches, which, she says, were in a different league from those of the Italians. She describes the former as:

... robustly built, panelled with boards, and covered and lined. The window frames and doors from the shelled barracks served as wall cladding. Nevertheless the water was ten centimetres deep in these trenches.⁴⁰⁰

However, 'a sewer would be paradise compared to the Italian Isonzo trenches.'⁴⁰¹ Resurrecting her stereotype of the unwashed Italians, she compared their filth with the mess she had seen earlier on Plava:

Of course the condition is made worse by the habitual lack of cleanliness of these Italians. Our troops continually clean the Hill of Plava whenever it is practical. But because they [the Italians] so often rotate their troops, those who are present have little motivation to keep things clean... And it's often said they don't even have latrines.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁷ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

³⁹⁸ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

³⁹⁹ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁰⁰ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁴⁰¹ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁴⁰² Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

Perhaps it was true that the Italian trenches were even more putrid than those of the Austro-Hungarians. In any case, there is no doubt Schalek hated the Italians, as did many other Austro-Hungarians, for their betrayal and their opportunist attack on their land. Schalek was not one to hide her feelings. The sight of disgusting filth in the Italian trenches gave her an opportunity to score points.

Schalek then moved further north to visit the front line in the Julian Alps at Krn, where troops had to contend with freezing temperatures and deep snowfalls even in the summer months, in addition to enemy attacks. Before her journey up the mountain, however, she was billeted at a hotel on the shores of Lake Wocheiner, a picturesque resort in the Julian Alps, some distance behind the lines, where life was peaceful and safe.⁴⁰³ She used this contrast to make the point to her readers that the war ‘extends its visible width at the most ten kilometres inland,’⁴⁰⁴ and concluded that one:

... would see all of Europe virtually undisturbed, business as usual, right up to this belt around the perimeter of the Central Powers. This peace and quiet on the home front ... is the reason the war is so prolonged.⁴⁰⁵

This observation, however, was not published in her report in the *Neue Freie Presse*, but only in the book version of her reports. Perhaps its subversive simplicity led it to fall foul of the censor. It did, after all, carry the conviction that the Central Powers could stop the war if they wanted to.

In the *Neue Freie Presse*, however, Schalek’s observations of the alpine front itself were given full coverage, gory details included. After describing her journey up the mountainside in a precariously balanced cable car, she reported on the wintry conditions:

... the snow from last winter still lies 500 metres below the summit. Now the snow is being shovelled away from the road, over six metre high walls of snow. In winter these walls were twelve metres high.⁴⁰⁶

The weather, she said, exacerbated the conditions the soldiers had to endure, and many were killed by falling rocks and avalanches. She felt it was ‘morally repulsive that the troops in this region have to cope with that as well.’⁴⁰⁷ She was surprised to find such ‘unconquerable masses of snow’⁴⁰⁸ even in June, and found that Krn:

... is not only a zone of battle against men, but almost more against the wind, so that this unleashed violence of nature mixes it into the most terrible witches’ brew.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰³ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Aufstieg zum Krn, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 1.

⁴⁰⁴ Schalek, Alice: Aufstieg zum Krn, in: Schalek: *Am Isonzo*, p. 210.

⁴⁰⁵ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 210.

⁴⁰⁶ Schalek: Aufstieg, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁰⁷ Schalek: Aufstieg, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁰⁸ Schalek: Aufstieg, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁰⁹ Schalek: Aufstieg, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

In a macabre twist, one of the soldiers asked her to photograph the corpse of a soldier who had been buried in an avalanche some time earlier. The corpse was now half-protruding from the melting snow. She would present the photograph with her article, she said,

... so that this 'progress of our civilisation' would be captured on film, so that 'the civilised' can see what's really happening to their brothers in the mountains who are giving their lives for them.⁴¹⁰

There is an acid tone in her comments. She is resolved to disturb the complacency of people on the home front who, by their indifference, allow the war to continue. Implicit in her remarks is the accusation that it is the 'progress' of her own people (the 'civilised,' whose brothers are being turned to corpses) that is responsible for the carnage. She also reported that to get the photograph she had to go so near to the grisly sight that 'the camera shook in my hand.'⁴¹¹ The photograph was also published in her book *Am Isonzo*.

Schalek stayed the night in the crude alpine fortifications and wrote her subsequent impressions in her next article.⁴¹² The soldiers, she said, recalled their conquest of the summit of Krn as a 'stroke of genius.'⁴¹³ In a passage rich with irony, she praised the superiority of the Austro-Hungarian troops as they repulsed a later Italian attack:

And the chivalry of the enemy's action was unconditionally acknowledged... They came up in full battle dress and in full view, over open country. And one of the most glorious achievements of the Isonzo Army is to have brought such an opponent to a dead stop.⁴¹⁴

One of Schalek's complaints about the Italians was that they seemed to throw men into battles in great numbers with little regard for their survival (in some respects this was true of the Italian Isonzo offensives in general). Here, by labelling this chivalrous in a rather tongue-in-cheek way, she is able to score a point for her own side's glory.

Fighting a long term defensive campaign in ever-changing snow brought its own challenges to the troops. The trenches and their defensive wire entanglements were often repeatedly buried in new snowdrifts, and

... the soldiers had to be content just to throw the new coils of barbed wire over the tops of the trenches when the old wire traps were buried under the snow. In the end they were fighting twelve metres above the original trenches.⁴¹⁵

Snowfalls made fighting extremely difficult and at times forced it to a halt:

⁴¹⁰ Schalek: Aufstieg, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴¹¹ Schalek: Aufstieg, NFP, 19. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁴¹² Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Die Fronten auf dem Krn, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 1.

⁴¹³ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 1.

⁴¹⁴ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 1.

⁴¹⁵ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

At times the awful weather forced a checkmate on these determined, dogged opponents. Friend and fiend shovelled, shovelled, shovelled snow.⁴¹⁶

Many soldiers died of exposure or were killed in avalanches. 600 Austro-Hungarian soldiers lost their lives in avalanches in the winter of 1915-16 alone.⁴¹⁷

Once again Schalek noticed and praised the supply troops, who worked under extreme conditions:

In pairs they hauled up mortar shells. You could see huge columns of roofing iron, boards and barrels coming up. They stood out clearly below from the snow slope. The haulers often stopped in their tracks, wiping the sweat from their faces. These were men who had never set eyes on a mountain before the war.⁴¹⁸

Almost all the stories the soldiers told Schalek had to do with snowstorms and avalanches. One example:

For fourteen days all transport was blocked. Barracks were snowed in for months. When they stepped outside the storehouse the movement brought masses of snow down on their heads. The twenty minute path to the positions took six and a half hours to travel. And the alpine rescue patrols had more to worry about than fighting troops and first aid: rescuing the lost, digging out those who were buried alive.⁴¹⁹

During her stay on Krn a battle broke out on the nearby slopes of Mrzli Brh, where, the men told her, 'not one evening passed without casualties.'⁴²⁰ Watching the battle she noticed that the soldiers with her on Krn seemed unmoved, almost uninterested. She saw this as one of the reasons 'why the war is so endlessly endured. You become dulled, impervious to everything that doesn't touch you personally.'⁴²¹

Schalek has now come a very long way from the naïve character she showed herself to be little more than a year earlier on the Tyrol front. She has gone through phases of being shocked, saddened, frustrated, horrified, appalled and angered by the war. Now she is beginning to see that when one's exposure to the horrors reaches a certain level, one can be dulled by it. But never completely. While the battle on Mrzli Brh was still raging she began her descent from Krn, and admits to having an attack of fear:

My teeth are chattering. Cold sweat stings my forehead. I know very well where it comes from. Too often I've heard how bodily fatigue wears down the soldier's

⁴¹⁶ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁴¹⁷ Cf.: Schindler: 2003, p. 135.

⁴¹⁸ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴¹⁹ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴²⁰ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁴²¹ Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

vigour and how hard it is to keep composure when you're dead tired. Now I feel it in my own body, and after such a brief period of drudgery. And all the men who have held the Isonzo for the past year are constantly tired. They never get a good night's sleep. They're never refreshed. They stand constantly under the high stress of danger. They've given the upper limits of their strength, uninterrupted, without a single break.⁴²²

Once again she re-stated her belief that only those who had seen the war and its terrors could understand the sufferings of the soldiers. Through her own exhaustion and fear she found herself a little better able to comprehend what they were living through daily.

Schalek made one more report before finishing her 1916 tour of the Isonzo front. Here she described the Austro-Hungarian defence of the mountain of Kozmarice, plus her visit to the slopes of Mrzli Brh and Bodil Brh. In this report, once again, we see a mixture of patriotic praise of the Austro-Hungarian troops, slurs against the Italians, and Schalek's growing anti-war sentiment. Again, though, in places these themes are inextricably interwoven in her prose.

On Kozmarice the Italian infantry had been repulsed after fierce and costly attacks, and some of their trenches had been captured. An Austro-Hungarian officer described the scene to Schalek:

'Our troops found 1066 yet unburied bodies, and the most gruesome thing was a staircase made of 14 corpses, that served the steepest of the fortifications.'⁴²³

In such unsanitary conditions there was a danger of epidemics, so the Austro-Hungarian troops were forced 'to sanitise every occupied area.'⁴²⁴ Schalek took the opportunity to reinforce her rhetoric of the unhygienic Italians:

The Italians are actually far, far more unhygienic than you'd have reasonably concluded from what we knew of them previously.⁴²⁵

The Austro-Hungarian soldiers, she reports, must constantly defend themselves against infectious diseases. But this is only one aspect of their heroic struggle. Schalek moves on to a set of pictures of the ugliness of the war, thoroughly interwoven with praise of the stoic, heroic Austro-Hungarian soldiers. She begins:

But the man on the Isonzo learns to endure everything. Cold, heat, damp, dust, heaps of rocks, water shortages, flies. He overcomes his fear of earth mines and air torpedoes; of bombs that fall from the sky and explosives that heave the

⁴²² Schalek: Die Fronten, NFP, 24. August 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁴²³ Schalek, Alice: Bei der Isonzoarmee. Auf den Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, den Mrzli Brch und den Bodil Brch, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁴²⁴ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁴²⁵ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 2.

ground asunder; of daggers, hand grenades; massive, persistent artillery barrages.⁴²⁶

But one zone of battle the soldiers would never ‘learn to endure,’ says Schalek, was that of Mrzli Brh. The name itself had come to have ‘a chilling ring to it.’⁴²⁷ A photograph of part of this position, taken by Schalek to illustrate her article, showed it to be a wasteland of metal fragments, haphazard steel spike defences, and shell-churned earth. Of all the front line positions she had thus far seen on the Isonzo, Schalek found Mrzli Brh the most horrible:

It’s even worse than on Monte San Michele, because there, enemy territory never lies above the twisting, snaking front line. It’s worse than on Podgora, because this mountain, attacked incessantly for eighteen months, is only 200 metres high. It’s worse than in the region of Plava-Zagora, because there the line is not so fearfully long.⁴²⁸

A soldier told her that the worst thing for him on the Isonzo front was the waiting, passive and without activity, that seemed to become endless:

‘We wait. Another day goes by. We’re still alive. But tomorrow! A shell bursts five paces to the right or ten to the left. And always sitting. Waiting...’⁴²⁹

Schalek herself spent only one full day on Mrzli Brh, but found this unbearable. She shares the experience with her readers:

Around Midday an exhausting heat lays itself over Mrzli Brh like a the lid of a cooking pot. From above, the sun burns; from below, the rocks. It’s like being in a steam bath. There are so many flies you no longer bother to swat them away. There’s terrible thirst and your eyes flicker. Not a single green leaf grows on this scene of devastation.⁴³⁰

To move safely between the trenches and the rear defences at Tolmein, the soldiers had ‘hacked a kind of chimney in the stone-hard rocks of [the hill of] Bodil’⁴³¹ and hung a rope ladder down it. Schalek found this very strenuous and found herself wondering how the supply troops could carry the daily provisions up it. She recognised, however, that this half-protected path was an enormous improvement over what the troops had been using just a few months before. In a dramatic appeal to her readers’ imagination she comments:

⁴²⁶ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴²⁷ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴²⁸ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴²⁹ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴³⁰ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁴³¹ Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), p. 4.

This graphic word 'before' is the most horrendous in the Isonzo-vocabulary. What it must have been like, 'before.'⁴³²

But in point of fact, what came 'after' was even worse. Two months after Schalek returned to Vienna the Italians would make their most successful attack ever on the Isonzo front, taking Gorizia and pushing the front line forward towards the Plain of Trieste. Until this time, the defence of the Isonzo had been the only Austro-Hungarian campaign in the entire war that it had carried out successfully on its own. All its other victories had been masterminded, led and supported by German forces. Now even this star was about to fade.

Schalek would return to the Isonzo front ten months later and see her countrymen under even more pressure, after yet another half a million Austro-Hungarian and Italian men had been lost. Meanwhile, she busied herself in Vienna and beyond with her other great passion: the public lecture. In the autumn of 1916 through to the spring of 1917 she lectured to sell-out audiences in Austria-Hungary and Germany on her experiences on the Isonzo front, and her book of collected articles on the subject would be published late in 1916. We know of no other First World War correspondent who told so much of the truth about the battlefield so openly to the public, with official backing. But for many Austrians this was just too much. Slowly and doggedly the forces against her began to gather.

⁴³² Schalek: Tolmeiner Brückenkopf, NFP, 15. September 1916 (MB), S. 4.

Chapter Eleven: The rolling thunder review: Schalek's lecture tour

In Autumn 1916 Alice Schalek's second book of war memoirs was published, with the title *Am Isonzo: März bis Juli 1916* ('On the Isonzo, March to July 1916')⁴³³. It contained all the Isonzo articles from her *Neue Freie Presse* series, altered and added to in places, and illustrated with over 100 of the photographs she had taken at the front. The book was praised by her newspaper, which described it as 'the first [book] from the Royal and Imperial War Press Office that provides a complete and comprehensive account of an entire front.'⁴³⁴ Schalek herself set great store by this praise, and wrote to Major General Ritter von Hoen, commander of the War press Office:

General, you will have noticed that it is the first Austrian war book to contain a complete, comprehensive, ordered account of an entire front.⁴³⁵

The book shows how Schalek systematically worked her way through all the major defence zones along the entire Isonzo front, providing a detailed account of the troops' environment, folk tales, habits, attitudes and fears, together with the dangers and horrors they lived with and died among. It also brings the reader close to the unique features and terrors of particular battles. It is not only 'the first Austrian war book' to do such a thing, but a very rare example of a first hand, contemporary account of any major First World War front line by a journalist. Despite the author's bias, it is a valuable source, alongside others, in the historical study of the war.

The *German Publications Guide*⁴³⁶ described the book as 'an unparalleled document in a class of its own,'⁴³⁷ praising the 'splendid descriptive skill of the author'⁴³⁸ and her 'superb and revealing photographs.'⁴³⁹ The *Guide* expected 'complete success for this unique work,'⁴⁴⁰ that described 'with superhuman stamina, under circumstances never before experienced, the unsurpassed bravery and sacrifice that the Austro-Hungarian troops'⁴⁴¹ had displayed on the Isonzo.

The book did indeed describe the 'unsurpassed bravery and sacrifice' of the Austro-Hungarian troops, but only by showing in great and ugly detail *why* they must be regarded as brave. Schalek had remained loyal to the task laid upon her by the generals, but to do so credibly she had brought the ugliness of the 20th century battlefield into the

⁴³³ Schalek, Alice, *Am Isonzo: März bis Juli 1916*, Vienna, L.W. Siedel & Sohn, 1916.

⁴³⁴ Anon: NFP, 11. December 1916 (MB), p. 13.

⁴³⁵ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, Vienna, 5. November 1916.

⁴³⁶ *Das Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel*

⁴³⁷ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek M09B/137792: *Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel*, 1. November 1916.

⁴³⁸ *Börsenblatt*.

⁴³⁹ *Börsenblatt*.

⁴⁴⁰ *Börsenblatt*.

⁴⁴¹ *Börsenblatt*.

parlours and cafes of her fellow citizens: mud, excrement, vermin, rotting corpses on every square inch of land, the terror of *Trommelfeuer*, choking heat, freezing cold, the nervous strain of relentless attacks, endless nights under fire, the daily train crowded with wounded, the stench and sights of living amidst deserts of devastation.

The book was also shot through with Schalek's personal – and increasingly negative – response to the war. She saw it as a tragedy that was causing young men to 'waste away' in their thousands. It was 'nothing natural, nothing organic,' yet it would be stopped within days if the people on the home front really knew what it was like.

The book also put forward an oft-repeated question: how was it that these men were able to endure so much terror for so long?

In part she answered this by praising their bravery. But at times she simply left the question open. What was it that enabled the soldiers to put up with such an inferno? How did troops cowering in trenches and dugouts endure the pounding hell of an artillery barrage that might last hours or even days – and not just once but again and again, punctuated by attack and defence that might involve repeated bouts of hand to hand fighting in air thick with the whizzing steel of shrapnel and bullets – more often than not on rations hardly fit for a dog, amidst constant bouts of flue and diarrhoea, in daily surroundings less comfortable than a neglected pig pen?

In fact, very few troops fared well in these conditions. The British learnt early in the war that to keep the morale of their fighting men high they had to rotate them often – a few days at the very front line, a few days in rear defensive positions, a few days rest behind the lines, and regular periods of leave. Troops who were badly treated simply failed to perform, and often looked eagerly for opportunities to surrender to the enemy. What Schalek would not have known at the time was that, taking into account all their theatres of war, Austro-Hungarian troops surrendered and deserted in far greater proportions than those of any other country. Historian Geoffrey Wawro explains:

Throughout the war, Austro-Hungarian units tended to desert, straggle and surrender in large numbers and Habsburg efforts to overcome this defeatism with patriotic propaganda were in vain. In all, 1.7 million Austrian prisoners-of-war were taken, a total that was second only to Russians in absolute terms and first in relative terms. By comparison, 180,000 British were taken prisoners-of-war, 500,000 French, and less than 60,000 Italians.⁴⁴²

While Wawro's figures for Italian prisoners of war are debatable, he rightly contends that the Austro-Hungarian army was 'slack, refractory and demoralised' as early as 1914, largely for reasons of race and nationality. The army that went to war in 1914 was approximately 44 percent Slav, 28 percent German, 18 percent Hungarian, 8 percent Rumanian and 2 percent Italian. The empire was run, however, chiefly by German Austrians in Vienna and Hungarians in Budapest, and the racial and nationalistic tensions within this vast, multi-ethnic empire had been simmering for years before the war broke

⁴⁴² Wawro, 1996, p. 340.

out. It was not uncommon for street battles to break out between Germans, Czechs and Slovenes in the Austrian half of the empire, while Croatia periodically rebelled against Hungarian rule and the Rumanians of Transylvania looked toward Bucharest for liberation from what they saw as their Habsburg oppressors. There were vast inequalities of wealth and of opportunity between ethnic groups, made especially evident in large cities like Vienna where different groups lived in close proximity to one another.

While the multi-ethnic character of the empire had its strong points, especially for minorities such as the Jews, who had no homeland of their own to look towards, there was also a sense in which the empire only served to prevent ethnic groups developing their own nationhood and independent statehood. For many in the Austro-Hungarian army, it was never clear why they were fighting to preserve the empire. For this reason, strategic planners had to be very careful which ethnic groups they assigned to which theatres of war.

Schalek might not have witnessed any wholesale desertion of troops during her visit to the Isonzo front, but there are good reasons for this. Firstly, at the time of her visits in 1916, the Isonzo front was quite static. The big Italian offensive that began just before she first arrived was not successful in breaking up the stable shape of the front line. In order to surrender *en masse*, troops needed the confusion of boundaries created by successful enemy attacks. This had happened frequently in Serbia and then on the Russian front, where Habsburg troops surrendered in their tens of thousands, but it was less frequent on the Isonzo. While the status quo persisted, Austro-Hungarian troops were effectively imprisoned by their own barbed wire. They could not desert, for that would entail slipping through their own side's checkpoints and military police. And they could not surrender to the enemy because of the stable but dangerous strip of no-man's-land that separated them from him.

Secondly, General Borojevic seems to have had special skills in commanding his men. As Schalek herself noted, he was not a distant, callous commander. He had a huge reputation among his men as a skilful strategist and he won and kept their trust. The fact that he was Croatian and that a large proportion of the Isonzo army were Croatian and Slovenian would also have given the men a sense of kinship with him. Finally, in 1916, when the front line was on Slovenia's doorstep, locally recruited units had a strong nationalist motivation to keep the Italians out.

On the other hand, one factor that might have led many Austro-Hungarian soldiers in the Isonzo army to consider surrendering or deserting was the canny and efficient way General Borojevic deployed his forces.⁴⁴³ Out of his best and most reliable troops he formed special forces units (the French called these *une masse de choc*) who were used for attacks and counter-attacks only. After each engagement they were quickly withdrawn to resting places well behind the front line, safe from both shelling and enemy infantry attacks. These elite units – mostly of Hungarian or Austrian German ethnicity - were given extra rations and kept in peak condition, to be able to be moved quickly up and down the front line wherever their extra skills were needed. Meanwhile, the daily grind of

⁴⁴³ Wavro, 1996, p. 403

manning front line trenches was left to lower ability soldiers and to ethnic groups who were known to be less reliable. It was these mainly Slavic and Rumanian troops who had to sit out the heavy artillery bombardments that often left up to half their number dead or maimed, and respond with initial defence when the Italians followed up the shelling with infantry attacks.

When the Isonzo troops did find themselves on an unstable front line, in the late summer of 1918 at the Piave River, tens of thousands surrendered *en masse* as soon as the fighting started. Austro-Hungarians who managed to surrender early told the Italians and their Entente allies that entire Habsburg regiments were eagerly waiting for a big Entente push so that they take advantage of the opportunity to surrender.⁴⁴⁴ However, this was two years on from Schalek's 1916 Isonzo tour. By that time the long years of conflict had taken their toll on the Austro-Hungarian troops, they were deep inside Italy and did not have the incentive that they were defending their own territory, and they were sharply aware that the Central Powers were crumbling.

While critics are right to point to the general weakness in discipline of the Austro-Hungarian armies, what Schalek saw on the Isonzo in 1916 was more the exception than the rule. The fact remains that Boroevic's army did hold the line. It was the gold star in the Austro-Hungarian war effort.

As we shall see, Schalek did write, one year later, of the timidity and 'near panic' of retreating Austro-Hungarian troops, though this was on the Russian front. In any case, in showing her readers how violent, frightful, devastating, ugly and incomprehensible a 20th century front line was, and in openly questioning whether such carnage was necessary, she had already pushed the boundaries of allowable wartime journalism as far as or further than probably any other mainstream First World War correspondent.

Her book was a modest success. She reported in spring 1918 that by that time 4,000 copies had been sold. It was never reprinted in German. Its lasting value was affirmed by the Italians and Slovenians who, as we have already mentioned, published translations in their respective languages in 1977 and 2005.

While Schalek's book was at the press, two momentous events took place in Vienna. On 21 October 1916 Friedrich Adler, son of the socialist leader Viktor Adler, assassinated Austrian Prime Minister Count Karl von Stürgkh in a Viennese restaurant, shouting 'Down with Absolutism! We want peace!' While this in itself did not alter Austria-Hungary's war aims, it does give a hint of the kind of tensions that were pulling at the heart of the empire. Absolutism – rule by the emperor's appointed elite – was seen by many as the biggest stumbling block to peace. Exactly one month later the aging Emperor Franz Josef died, to be replaced by the young and inexperienced Karl I. Franz Josef had lost interest in the war in his last days, withdrawing more and more from decision-making and involvement with his cabinet. Karl, however, became very involved, with the great aim of trying to bring about an honourable peace for his country. For the next two years he sought by diplomatic means to extricate Austria-Hungary from the war. Initially

⁴⁴⁴ Wavro, 1996, p. 409

the Italians turned him down point-blank. They believed they were winning and wanted to keep up the shooting. A year later, when Italy appeared to have been beaten, it was the Germans who held Austria-Hungary to their war commitments. Karl's efforts were a failure. Austria-Hungary was now locked into a war that even its emperor did not want.

A week before her prime minister's assassination Schalek began her season of public lectures on the war. On 14 October 1916 she gave the first in an extended season of talks, with the title 'Three months on the Isonzo front.' She illustrated the lecture with 225 slides of the photos she had taken. The opening night's lecture was reviewed in the *Neue Freie Presse*:

Alice Schalek, whose descriptions of the war are greeted everywhere with the liveliest interest, held her keenly awaited slide-photo lecture on her experiences and impressions during her three-month visit to the Isonzo front.⁴⁴⁵

Major General Ritter Von Hoen added his weight in support, with words of introduction. Given that von Hoen was commander of the War press Office and Manager of the War Archives, this indicates the extent to which Schalek's lecture was seen as both helpful propaganda for the war effort and valuable historical data. The article reports von Hoen's words:

Seventeen months have now passed since the Latin wave has been raging against the iron wall of our Kingdom. The efforts of this malicious, thieving enemy, who threatened and continues to threaten the borders of our empire, have been unsuccessful. Through this slide presentation one sees the terrible fierceness of the fighting on the Isonzo front. These pictures were taken by the war correspondent under great personal danger. They are also of historical interest for the future.⁴⁴⁶

The author of the article commented:

Fräulein Schalek, speaking freely in her straightforward and therefore doubly engaging lecture, reinforces the words [of von Hoen].⁴⁴⁷

Commenting on Schalek's motivation, the article continued:

It was not out of idle curiosity that she journeyed to the front. She wanted to see the war with her very own eyes. She was already shaken by its horror from afar. She wanted to get to know it by immediate observation.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁵ Anon.: Vortrag Alice Schalek. „Drei Monate an der Isonzofront“, NFP, 15. October 1916 (MB), p. 17.

¹⁴ Anon.: Vortrag Alice Schalek. „Drei Monate an der Isonzofront“, NFP, 15. October 1916 (MB), p. 17.

⁴⁴⁷ Anon.: Vortrag Alice Schalek. „Drei Monate an der Isonzofront“, NFP, 15. October 1916 (MB), S. 17.

⁴⁴⁸ Anon.: Vortrag Alice Schalek. „Drei Monate an der Isonzofront“, NFP, 15. October 1916 (MB), S. 18.

The themes of the lecture, said the article, were Schalek's experiences on the front – as she had already described in her feature articles in the *Neue Freie Presse* - and her impressions of the soldiers' lives in the trenches and dugouts.

The lecture was sufficiently popular to be repeated four times before the end of the year, and in November she embarked on 'a major speaking tour that would see her back in Vienna by December.'⁴⁴⁹ On 3 December the *Neue Freie Presse* reported:

Alice Schalek has meanwhile been invited to lecture by many Austrian, Hungarian and German cities, and has already spoken in Graz, Ljubljana, Salzburg, Linz, Prague and Brn, and also in Reichenberg, Aussig and Karlsbad, in sold out halls and before leading members of the community. As Alice Schalek is still scheduled to go to Innsbruck, Wels, Teschen, Mährisch-Ostau and Budapest, and will be lecturing all January in Germany, the two *Urania* lectures are for the moment the only ones in Vienna.⁴⁵⁰

Schalek had by this time given the lecture 18 times in Austria-Hungary and would give it another 21 times in the larger cities in Germany. On 31 December the *Neue Freie Presse* reported:

The publicity⁴⁵¹ for the glorious deeds of the Isonzo army in the confederated German kingdoms becomes so much more effective as the most distinguished societies and organisations have invited Alice Schalek to lecture. The lecture will take place four times in Berlin, twice in each of Munich and Frankfurt, and also in Hamburg, Stuttgart, Leipzig, Bremen, Breslau, Freiburg, Mannheim, Mainz, Krefeld, Jena, Görlitz, Fürth, Osnabrück and Münster.⁴⁵²

We detect here a hint of the sense of inferiority felt by Austro-Hungarians as a fighting force, in relation to their more militarily accomplished German cousins. By this stage in the war the Austro-Hungarian army had a pitiful reputation among the Germans. The relationship between the two empires had sagged to the level of mutual suspicion, with Germany feeling Austria-Hungary was more a liability than an asset, and their 'friendship' had become little more than a public façade.⁴⁵³ The Isonzo defence was the only success the Austro-Hungarian army had achieved of its own accord, though even while Schalek was giving her lectures, it was losing ground inch by inch to the Italians. Schalek was cast into the role of a propagandist for Austria-Hungary among the Germans. She herself was aware of her role in publicising the superiority of the Isonzo forces. Shortly before the lecture tour she wrote to von Hoen: 'I know of a lot I can do to promote the fame and honour of the Austro-Hungarian army.'⁴⁵⁴ The *Neue Freie Presse*

⁴⁴⁹ Anon.: NFP, 31. October 1916 (MB), p. 12.

¹⁸ Anon.: Vortrag Alice Schalek in der „Urania“, NFP, 3. December 1916 (MB), p. 17.

⁴⁵¹ The German word is *Propaganda*. This has the base meaning of 'publicity,' and does not necessarily carry the loaded connotations of our English word 'propaganda.'

⁴⁵² Anon.: NFP, 31. December 1916 (MB), p. 16.

⁴⁵³ Cf.: Rauchensteiner: 1993, p. 330-339.

⁴⁵⁴ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, 22. September 1916.

followed Schalek's German tour closely, and on 4 February 1917 quoted German press reviews in some detail:

The *Weser Zeitung* said: 'The speaker vividly described the almost unsurpassable achievements of the Isonzo Army and had the undivided attention of her listeners, who followed her with eager attentiveness to the end.' In the Fürther Theatre the very last seat was filled, and the *Fürther Zeitung* said: 'One will never forget the deep, moving impression of her tribute to the heroic fighters.'⁴⁵⁵

Unlike Schalek's own people, the Germans had little predisposition to get excited about an Austro-Hungarian army. The fact that her lecture tour was so successful in Germany and that she elicited such praise is evidence that she was a very effective speaker who could give an audience a night to remember. It also suggests she sincerely believed her message, the thrust of which seems to have been the heroism of the Austro-Hungarian Isonzo army. On 19 January she wrote to von Hoen from Leipzig:

It was an unparalleled success. Everyone is saying it was the first real war lecture that's ever been given. Nothing like it has ever been seen before. And everyone is saying it's good that I've come. Now they can see that they've underestimated Austria. I don't want to overstate my achievement, but it's certainly important for the Fatherland. And that makes me so happy, and I can hold my head up high... Where does that leave Karl Kraus?⁴⁵⁶

From these comments we can say for certain that, aware of Germany's low estimate of the Austro-Hungarian war effort, one of Schalek's key goals in her German tour was to challenge this view, and doing so gave her immense personal satisfaction.

Her mention of Karl Kraus is also interesting. Kraus's personal attacks on her were wearying. In May 1916 in his newspaper, *Die Fackel*, he had described her personally as 'the most horrendous war atrocity,' claiming that she 'was destroying human dignity in this war.' Schalek's brother Norbert felt this was such a deep insult to his sister that he challenged Kraus to a duell – a challenge the Kraus refused to accept.⁴⁵⁷

Schalek's photographs were also appreciated by her audiences. The *Neue Freie Presse* reported on 4 February:

The *Vorwärts* wrote: 'The photographs are of highest value. Previously I'd never seen war photographs that have made the war so vivid, neither on the screen nor in illustrated magazines...' The *Mannheimer Generalzeiger* said: 'One feels that we [previously] had only a pale picture of the real situation. Alice Schalek's words would have seemed like exaggeration, but the photographs provided

⁴⁵⁵ Anon.: Die Isonzovortragsreise Alice Schaleks durch Deutschland, NFP, 4. February 1917 (MB), p. 13.

⁴⁵⁶ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1.: Letter from Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, 21. January 1917.

⁴⁵⁷ Krasny, et.al., 1999, p. 14.

overwhelming evidence. Their own urgent message sank deep into the hearts of the listeners.⁴⁵⁸

Austria, said the *Neue Freie Presse*, could be proud of its diligent, committed war correspondent. The aim of winning proper recognition for the troops' achievements had been fulfilled. The speaking tour had been 'a great success for patriotism.'⁴⁵⁹

But not in everyone's eyes. Schalek's lecture in Innsbruck in December 1916 was received with anger by some of the local people. A few months later, a formal complaint would be brought against her in the *Reichsrat*, the Austrian parliament, on their behalf.

But for the time being she was left in peace. In February 1917 the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy awarded her the *Goldene Verdienstkreuz mit der Krone am Bande der Tapferkeitsmedaille* (Gold Service Cross of Merit), a very high honour, in recognition of her service to the Monarchy.⁴⁶⁰

Schalek would repeat her lecture nine more times in Vienna before her return to the Isonzo front in May. But in April of that year she was asked by the Ministry of Education to prepare and deliver a version of the lecture 'suitable for school pupils.'⁴⁶¹ She agreed to hold the lecture repeatedly in the *Urania* for a week. Sessions were attended by 'about 10,000 middle-school pupils and their teaching staff, from all the middle-schools in Vienna, and were received with enthusiasm.'⁴⁶² The *Neue Freie Presse* reported that she was thanked personally by the Minister of Education:

The lecture 'Three months on the Isonzo front,' that was repeated many times for Viennese middle school pupils, was ideally suited to give a clear, moving picture of the life of our fighters on the Isonzo front, through the use of excellent, vivid photographs. Through its patriotic content it was able to forge anew the spiritual bond between youth and the army.⁴⁶³

These were Schalek's last lectures in Vienna during the war.

What did Schalek say during the lectures? Unfortunately there is no written record. She does not seem to have written a full text of what she intended to say, but, as the *Neue Freie Presse* reported, spoke freely. It is quite likely that she adjusted her emphasis for different audiences. In Germany she was concerned to convey the message that the Austro-Hungarian army was a proficient fighting force. Reports of her lectures within Austria suggest she was aiming to be more generally informative. She must also have told the Germans more than was generally known about battlefield conditions, as the reporter for the *Mannheimer Generalzeiger* confessed that his previous knowledge was

⁴⁵⁸ Anon.: Die Isonzovortragsreise, NFP, 4. February 1917 (MB), p. 13.

⁴⁵⁹ Anon.: Die Isonzovortragsreise, NFP, 4. February 1917 (MB), p. 13.

⁴⁶⁰ Cf.: Rapp: 'Das Ganze ist so grandios organisiert...', p. 31.

⁴⁶¹ Anon.: Der Isonzovortrag Alice Schalek für die Mittelschulen, NFP, 20. April 1917 (MB), p. 9.

⁴⁶² Anon.: Vortrag Alice Schalek, NFP, 8. May 1917 (MB), p. 7.

⁴⁶³ Anon.: NFP, 9. May 1917 (MB), p. 7.

‘a pale picture’ compared with her more vivid testimony, and Schalek wrote to von Hoen of people’s comments that they had never heard anything like this before. Further, the Innsbruck complaint, which we will consider in more detail later, centres on the ‘emotionalism’ of her battlefield descriptions. Presumably she was telling not only the bare facts about life and death in the trenches, but also her own reactions to this – as she had done in her articles.

While the ‘heroism’ of the troops was clearly the main focus of her talks, we have seen from Schalek’s articles that the evidence she provided in support of this heroism was very often the ugly, horrific, stinking, nerve-edge conditions that were the daily lot of the soldiers. We can only presume that the two themes were as inextricably interwoven in her lectures, as they were in her writings.

This would not have endeared her to some of those who were running the army. In 1917 Austria-Hungary was experiencing ever-deepening problems with recruitment and retention of troops, and with their morale and their willingness to fight. The home front was unstable and given to sectarian violence. Throughout 1917 the War Surveillance Unit made extra efforts to tighten censorship and beef up propaganda. Hundreds of extra censors were hired. Personnel were repositioned in the military hierarchy. In March 1917 Major General Ritter von Hoen was transferred out of the War Press Office.

This was not a good omen for Schalek. Storm clouds were gathering and her days as an officially accredited war correspondent were numbered.

Chapter Twelve: Apocalypse now: the tenth Isonzo battle

In May 1917 Italian commander-in-chief Cadorna unleashed a major offensive on the Isonzo front, generally known as the ‘Tenth Battle of the Isonzo.’ It was almost a complete failure, and cost the Italians some 127,840 dead and wounded and the Austro-Hungarians around 75,000.⁴⁶⁴ In late summer of the previous year the Italians had had their biggest success, taking Gorizia and many of the defensive positions around it. Now they were attempting to press home their advantage and advance down the coast to Trieste.

This was the highest monthly total of casualties Italy ever suffered. Nevertheless, in August and September Cadorna struck again (the ‘Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo’), this time with more success, but the loss of a further 100,000 men – again about double the Austro-Hungarian losses.

Alice Schalek was back at the Isonzo front during the Tenth Battle and was appalled at the wastefulness of the Italian tactics. In her first report from this visit she told her readers of:

... the reason for the unequalled anger of the defenders in all their positions: the reckless sacrifice of the attackers, the exaggerated importance of every conquest of just a few inches of land.⁴⁶⁵

The Italians, she said, were determined to take Trieste, no matter how high the cost. Italian prisoners of war told her: ‘If we had the city, then all our suffering would be worth it.’⁴⁶⁶ Yet, judging by the smallness of the gains they had made in nearly two years of fighting, at appalling cost, the Italians, though ‘thirsty for victory,’⁴⁶⁷ simply were not capable of reaching the city. She reflected:

If every battle wins Italy just one kilometre, that will mean twenty more battles!
No, the land cannot endure this.⁴⁶⁸

Having accepted that the Austro-Hungarian strategy on the Italian front would never be more than defensive, Schalek concluded:

Peace can only come when every Italian gives up hoping for Trieste, or when the sacrifice becomes so much that Trieste is not worth the price.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁴ These figures are from Stevenson, 2004, p. 329. Other historians put the losses as high as 160,000 for the Italians and 90,000 for the Austro-Hungarians: See Schaumann: Isonzo 1993, p. 180.

⁴⁶⁵ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der zehnten Isonzoschlacht, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁶⁶ Schalek: Bilder, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁶⁷ Schalek: Bilder, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁶⁸ Schalek: Bilder, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁶⁹ Schalek: Bilder, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 3.

She was therefore resigned to more of the same, and noted that ‘still more will have to die ... so that others can have peace.’⁴⁷⁰

Schalek’s view of the fruitlessness of Cadorna’s military campaign is shared by modern war historians. He was attacking heavily fortified positions, many of them elevated, with yet more elevated fall-back positions behind, and any incursion into the coastal plain leading to Trieste would put him in full view of Austro-Hungarian positions on the heights. In ten major battles he had consistently lost up to twice as many troops as the Austro-Hungarians, and casualty figures per battle in the vicinity of 100,000 were of the same magnitude as any of the larger powers suffered their offensives on the western and eastern fronts.

There were, however, political reasons for Cadorna’s incessant attacks. The deal the Italians had struck with the British in the secret ‘Treaty of London’ required Italy to fight the war actively in return for a promise of extended Italian territory – including Trieste - after it was all over. Yet historians still scratch their heads as to why Cordona could not think of a more effective theatre to engage the bulk of his troops.

What was so special about Trieste? The city had been a Roman colony and trading centre. After the fall of Rome it suffered centuries of uncertainty and changed hands many times. In the thirteenth century it pledged allegiance to Duke Leopold of Austria, and passed into the Habsburg Empire in 1382. It prospered as an international port, receiving immigrants from across the Mediterranean, though its dominant culture remained Italian. By the turn of the 20th century it had a population of over 150,000 and was a thriving cultural centre. Many of its inhabitants had supported Garibaldi in the formation of the nation state of Italy, and the irredentist movement was evident there before the war. In short, Trieste was a city with roots in two countries. The Italian irredentist and intellectual Scipio Slapater wrote of this dilemma:

Trieste can be separated from neither the commercial nor the Italian soul – and that will be its death. It longs for Rome and has to look towards Vienna. It is Italian, but its higher education has to be got in Vienna or Graz. It feels the meaning of things German, but has to fight against them. Its life is the heart-rending torture of competing forces. That is Trieste: a tragic composition.⁴⁷¹

While Schalek saw an Italian capture of Trieste as highly unlikely, she was nevertheless disappointed that the Austro-Hungarians had yielded ground in the Autumn of 1916 (while she had been absent from the front). She confessed to having enormous respect for the troops – bordering on awe – and was surprised that they did not see the loss of Gorizia and its bulwarks as a great shame. In an oblique criticism of General Borojevic, who had ordered the retreat from Gorizia, she commented:

Monte San Michele was never anything more to him than a hill that lay in his front line. Gorizia was just a city that happened to lie behind the lines. Gorizia

⁴⁷⁰ Schalek: *Bilder*, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁷¹ Quoted in Lunzer, 2002, p. 31.

was a lost cause to him as soon as the battle lines lay a kilometre to the east. For him the Isonzo region holds no spell, no awe. He works only with data, numbers, equipment.⁴⁷²

The sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth Isonzo battles had taken place from August to December 1916. Gorizia fell in the sixth battle, and Italy continued to make small but costly gains in its subsequent offensives. For Austria-Hungary at large, the loss of Gorizia was a catastrophe.⁴⁷³ Though it was of little strategic importance, it had been symbolic of the Habsburg army's resolute and successful stand against the persistently attacking Italians. It was also a city well known to the Habsburg army, as it had long been a rest and retirement centre for officers. Many of its villas were owned by generals, who bought them off the widows of their older comrades and passed them down the line to the next generation of officers.

Unlike Trieste, Gorizia was predominantly Slovenian in culture and language. After the war it was given to Italy. Many Slovenes left, but returned after the Second World War when the border was shifted back to the eastern outskirts of Gorizia. There they founded a new town, Nova Gorica (New Gorizia), on the Yugoslavian side of the border. An iron fence was erected along the streets and backyards separating the two countries, but was pulled down in after Slovenia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991.

In her second report, Schalek wrote of her visit to the positions on San Marco on 23 May:

They let me sit for three days up by the observers during the battle for Podgora. There was an unrestricted view over the entire basin of Gorizia from an opening under the summit that had been bored out of the mountain... Today there's a gigantic hole where the [Austro-Hungarian] commander's hut had stood. The Italian artillery barrage upon Podgora is now directed from the spot where our troops' daily provisions used to be given out.⁴⁷⁴

Schalek had the good fortune to be observing the one great Isonzo battle of the last five in which the Italians made no significant further gains. She might not have been aware of how close both armies were to exhaustion, and noted the endurance of the Habsburg troops, who had held the line,

... despite the monstrous escalation of weaponry, despite the reckless sacrifice of an entire people.⁴⁷⁵

It was for Schalek 'the summit of Isonzo-heroism' that 'these positions had been held for two whole years.'⁴⁷⁶ In a rather blatant expression of propaganda, Schalek reinterpreted the loss of Gorizia as a victory, 'actually one of the greatest examples of heroism on the

⁴⁷² Schalek: Bilder, NFP, 16. May 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁷³ Cf.: Rauchensteiner: 1993, p. 361.

⁴⁷⁴ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der zehnten Isonzoschlacht. San Marco, NFP, 30. May 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁷⁵ Schalek: San Marco, NFP, 30. May 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁴⁷⁶ Schalek: San Marco, NFP, 30. May 1917 (MB), p. 1.

Isonzo,⁴⁷⁷ as the troops had withdrawn no further than was necessary. And the fact that the Austro-Hungarians had openly admitted that this was a defeat, was actually a moral victory over the Italians, who tended to celebrate the most insignificant victories:

We Austrians don't make Homeric hymns out of our deeds. We don't exaggerate our successes. Nor do we twist our failures to make them look like successes. It has to do with our style: old-fashioned, perhaps, but generous, distinguished, noble.⁴⁷⁸

This has to be the low point in Schalek's later journalism. In one and the same passage she is accusing the Italians of exaggerating their successes, claiming that her side does not do this, yet herself doing it, and claiming she has not done it – and all to put a brave face on a tenuous situation. She has allowed her affection for the Isonzo troops, her loyalty to Austria-Hungary, her anger at the Italians, her desire to praise the troops to the home front, and no doubt her feeling of duty to the War Press Office, to take control of her writing and let it descend to the level of shoddy propaganda. A discerning reader would see right through it.

Yet it is this same emotional involvement with her work that made her unique among war correspondents: her loyalty to the troops also led her to write honest, vivid reports of the ugliness and horror of the 20th century battlefield. Her next article⁴⁷⁹ returns to this descriptive clarity. Still on San Marco, she experienced a fierce artillery attack from the Italian side:

The earth is cracking and banging like gigantic champagne corks popping. Everywhere you see balls of grey, brown and black smoke, with the lighter forms of shrapnel shells. The mortar bursts are glaring white. Shells roar and howl and whimper and scrape through the air. The heavy mortars hammer the earth. For the first time there's a bombardment of 'forty-mortars.' The men have never seen anything like it. The commander speaks hastily and quietly of the Russian front. There are battles there every eight days. There are hideous, deadly days. But there's never been a saturation barrage like this.⁴⁸⁰

One is led to ask whether Schalek's last sentence should be taken literally, as she often ends a paragraph with a superlative such as this. On the other hand, firepower was increasing on all sides during the war, as weapon technology developed and production became more prolific. Schalek quotes the words of a soldier who experienced the initial bombardment of the first days of the battle:

We were holding out in the dugouts, pressed together, sweating, in full battledress. In the space of a minute at least five to eight heavy shells thundered down on each dugout. The entrances bulged inwards, the arches stood firm. We'd

⁴⁷⁷ Schalek: San Marco, NFP, 30. May 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁷⁸ Schalek: San Marco, NFP, 30. May 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der zehnten Isonzoschlacht. Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁴⁸⁰ Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

spent five months day and night without rest building these dugouts, and that's what saved us. But it was so hot, hot enough to suffocate. You could endure anything if it weren't for the thirst. There's no death as horrible as thirst.⁴⁸¹

As Schalek watched the battle she became angry at the senselessness killing, that had now gone on for nearly three years throughout Europe, and criticised the governments of the belligerents, who were not prepared to forge a peace:

Those who stoke this war should – at least once – run through machinegun fire to a hilltop defensive position. All the difficulties of the Stockholm Conference, of trade, of nationalities, of colonies, and of confusion in the Balkans that the Entente have to make decisions about, would be immediately decided, if those concerned had to charge up Hill 171.⁴⁸²

The Stockholm Conference was a proposal initiated by the provisional government that had taken power in Russia after the 'February Revolution' (in March 1917 according to the western calendar). Socialist parties from neutral and warring countries were invited to send representatives to a wide-ranging discussion on how best to cooperate toward making peace. None of the warring powers were happy to allow party members to attend, and the Entente countries barred theirs from going. The conference failed to take place as such, and turned into a series of visits by socialist party members. Schalek's disappointment about the conference is well-placed. Russia had lost its appetite for the war and was set for one final push to attempt to win bargaining power for a negotiated peace with the Central Powers. The United States had declared war on Germany but was not yet mobilised sufficiently to make a difference to the front line in Europe. If there was to be a negotiated peace, this would be as good a moment as any for the Central Powers. But it was not to be.

One also senses Schalek's frustration that the message of how bloody and hideous the war had become had not got through to the warring governments. In fact it had, but up until mid-1917 the governments (apart from in Russia) were to a large extent entrapped by the public support they had generated for the war. Historian David Stevenson notes that there was huge public pressure on the governments of both sides to press on and 'win' the war, rather than give up now and thereby let the sacrifice of millions go for nothing.⁴⁸³ In that case, Schalek's vivid descriptions of the battlefield may have been doing at least some good, as they were being read by the Austrian public and could sour their appetite for war. Of course, Schalek picks out the Entente powers as especially responsible for the impasse. Her writing was consistent in its assumption that the Entente powers were the aggressors and the Central powers were being forced to pursue a defensive war. This was certainly the case on the Italian front, but the weight of scholarly opinion today certainly does not support her view overall.

⁴⁸¹ Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁸² Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁸³ Stevenson, 2004, pp. 320-370.

During the battle Schalek witnessed the use of poison gas for the first time. It had been used sporadically on the Isonzo front since June 1916, when the Austro-Hungarians had introduced it. Unfortunately for them, the wind blew the wrong way and 3000 of their own troops were gassed, many of them fatally.⁴⁸⁴ In this case, though, it was the Italians who launched a gas attack:

Between the command post and the road lies the smoke of the American gas grenades. This is a new development: there was none of it last year. Things have never been so terrible. America has also sent mortars for the artillery barrage. I get a whiff – somewhat diluted, fortunately – of this American ‘humanitarianism.’ It burns my throat and nostrils, makes my eyes water, makes me cough and wheeze. But those who have the pleasure of getting this American humanitarianism full in the face are brought to their death by it.⁴⁸⁵

Schalek’s sarcastic anger at the United States is partially justified. The United States tried very hard to stay out of the war, but in the first three months of 1917 both American public opinion and the view of President Wilson swung rapidly towards involvement. This was partly because the Germans resumed their (previously abandoned) policy of U-Boat attacks on merchant shipping without giving prior warning to the crews, but even more because of Germany’s blatant and clumsy attempts to persuade Mexico to invade the United States.⁴⁸⁶ On 6 April 1917 the United States declared war on Germany only, waiting until 7 December 1917 to declare war on Austria-Hungary. Meanwhile, however, the Americans supplied money, fuel and weapons to the Italians. This gave Schalek occasion to criticise the U.S. bitterly.

As she left the observation post on Monte San Marco she found herself still captivated by the sight of the battle and horrified by its intensity:

The entire mountain is burning. And a dark carpet hangs over the earth, across the whole area, a thick grey carpet of smoke that the white shell bursts decorate like embroidery. Black towers rise over it and the Italian fixed balloons sway backwards and forwards. In the midst of this dance of Hell sit human beings. The picture is too appalling to take in.⁴⁸⁷

It would be difficult to find a more revealing account of an artillery barrage in any mainstream war correspondent’s reports of the First World War. Whatever Schalek thinks of the politics of the United States or the Entente, she reserves her strongest words for the terror of battle itself. This particular artillery barrage was launched by her own side – the Italian balloons are in the target area. Yet she openly reveals her disgust at it.

Schalek’s next article continued her report on the ongoing battle. On 4 June she had watched the fighting in the region of Fajti Hrib from the standpoint of an artillery

⁴⁸⁴ Schaumann: 1993, p. 124.

⁴⁸⁵ Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁸⁶ See Stevenson, 2004, pp. 310 ff.

⁴⁸⁷ Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 4.

command post. She got 'an exceptional, magnificent and comprehensive picture of the battle'⁴⁸⁸ and noted that 'the power of the Isonzo army is unbroken on the 23rd day of the battle.'⁴⁸⁹

After praising the Austro-Hungarian troops for their success in blunting the attack, Schalek then turned to the Italians. On the one hand, she maintained, when her own side counter-attacked, 'The Italians ran away or immediately or surrendered,'⁴⁹⁰ The problem the Italian troops faced was, as always, the hopelessness of their attack strategies and the geography they were constrained by. Therefore Schalek notes the terrible price the Italians paid:

There were corpses lying about everywhere. And screams and groans came from the shattered dugouts. There was not the slightest trace left of their front line positions.⁴⁹¹

Schalek's next report, not published until 12 June, was written on 23 May, when the battle had been at its height. It was entitled simply 'The Hill*' - the asterisk being a censor's substitution for the military identification number of the hill in question. Schalek had visited a front line position under cover of darkness, but then had to stay the night in a dugout when it came under artillery fire. Trying to sleep while under bombardment was not easy:

The first night I lay there sleepless, as you can imagine. A rumpus like this takes some getting used to.⁴⁹²

During a relative lull in the shooting in the middle of the night Schalek was able to look about the battlefield, lit up by flares and shell bursts:

It's almost painful to see how the night is made into a day. It's as if the entire area is shaking with fear. And you have to stoop continually to keep out of the searchlights.⁴⁹³

Schalek found it particularly nerve-wracking not knowing when the next infantry attack might come. She noted that this fearful uncertainty was something the troops lived with every moment, day after day and night after night:

You don't know anything. You have to wait for the commander's word. This continuous, nerve wracking readiness. What a relief it would be to know something. The attacker always knows what's happening next. That gives him an advantage that can't be overestimated.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁸⁸ Schalek, Alice: Der Vorstoß unserer Truppen auf dem Karstplateau, NFP, 6. June 1917 (AB), p. 1.

⁴⁸⁹ Schalek: Karstplateau, NFP, 6. June 1917 (AB), p. 1.

⁴⁹⁰ Schalek: Karstplateau, NFP, 6. June 1917 (AB), p. 1.

⁴⁹¹ Schalek: Karstplateau, NFP, 6. June 1917 (AB), p. 1..

⁴⁹² Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der zehnten Isonzoschlacht. Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁹³ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁴⁹⁴ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

The Tenth Battle of the Isonzo took until the second week of June to burn itself out, but even at this early stage Schalek had word of Austro-Hungarian successes. The troops were holding the line against fierce onslaughts and even made small counter-attacking gains in places. Schalek maintained this was due to the courage of the Austro-Hungarian troops and their willingness to make sacrifices. She commented:

The success of our troops today exceeded our highest expectations. The enemy's firepower was many times greater than previously. But everyone in our organisation genuinely fulfilled their duty. It's not that our front line was fabulously built, as the enemy is reporting, but that the men are dependable and prepared for sacrifice. That's the reason the enemy couldn't make any headway.⁴⁹⁵

She claimed the Austro-Hungarian troops were outnumbered ten-to-one and that it was only through their *Pflichtbewusstsein* – their commitment to their duty – that they blunted the attack. The figures are grossly exaggerated. The Italians had about twice the number of divisions in the field on the Isonzo as the Austro-Hungarians at the time, not ten times. Schalek is most likely quoting a press release from the War Press Office. During Italy's next big offensive in August of the same year, after Schalek's dismissal, the *Neue Freie Presse* reported that 'the Italian forces outnumbered the Austrians by twelve to one.'⁴⁹⁶ The War Press Office was probably distorting the figures to enhance their troops' reputation on the home front, and possibly also to help build the case for the Germans to come to the rescue.

Despite the exaggeration it was still a work of enormous sacrifice to hold the line against the Italians' persistent titanic assaults. A Lieutenant told Schalek his theory:

'... it only *seems* an advantage to the Italians that they can afford to rotate their troops so often. It's only when you've been carrying the responsibility for defending a position for some time that it comes to be more important to you than your own life.'⁴⁹⁷

Swiss newspaper reports had a different theory, according to Schalek: that the Austro-Hungarians were blessed with 'the most modern technical equipment.'⁴⁹⁸ Yet this was not what Schalek saw with her own eyes. To her, the defensive positions looked 'like an enormous pile of rubbish.'⁴⁹⁹ This was probably much nearer to the truth. How, then, were the soldiers able to hold out for so long? She comments:

The world has to believe it, for it's simply incomprehensible that this monstrous slaughter is being held back. I came here to make it comprehensible. And now

⁴⁹⁵ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 2-3.

⁴⁹⁶ Quoted in 'No rest for the Austrians,' *The Times*, 31 August 1917.

⁴⁹⁷ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁹⁸ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁴⁹⁹ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

that I see the truth, I myself cannot grasp it. Again and again I try to explain how the soldiers are holding this great clod of earth.⁵⁰⁰

In her next report Schalek turned her attention to the defence of the Plateau of Doberdo, again asking how the defenders' success could be explained. In this report, published on 12 June but referring to an Italian artillery attack on 12 May, she quotes one of the soldiers:

'It's booming over your heads. Observers clamber out. Look about. Dead and wounded now lie in the dugout. It's crumbling more and more. It's getting hotter. More and more suffocating. There's no water. You sit on the earth and play cards. A few are singing. Some are writing to their mothers. "Dear Mum, I'm fine ..."⁵⁰¹

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers had and were having the same experiences in trenches and dugouts on Europe's front lines. Descriptions similar to the above were abundant in soldiers' letters and in their tales while on home leave. But it was rare to find one in a leading newspaper of one of the warring empires. In her oft-repeated pattern, having revealed some of the ugly truth Schalek now anchors it to a story of heroism. Due to the artillery barrage the supply troops were not able to bring the provisions the last stretch of distance to the dugouts. A soldier reports:

'Who'll go and fetch the provisions? Everyone volunteers. The supply troops are waiting below. Despite the shooting they're punctual. The coffee is brought up (the most important thing!). And cheese, bacon and cigarettes. They leave the soup below. It's dispensable. They all come back unhurt.'⁵⁰²

Then, in a passage reminiscent of Remarque's *All quiet on the western front*, Schalek reports on the effect of a lengthy bombardment on the soldiers:

It's so strange, that the prolonged artillery barrage doubles the power of their anger. The longer the Italians fire their shells, the crueller are the defenders they encounter.⁵⁰³

The result, again reminiscent of Remarque, was that:

... the survivors of our starving, sleep-deprived, now half deaf, exhausted company once again have success over their more numerous, well-slept, well-fed enemy.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰⁰ Schalek: Die Kote*, NFP, 12. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁰¹ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der zehnten Isonzoschlacht. Die Kote**, NFP, 15. June 1917 (MB), S. 1.

⁵⁰² Schalek: Die Kote**, NFP, 15. June 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵⁰³ Schalek: Die Kote**, NFP, 15. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁰⁴ Schalek: Die Kote**, NFP, 15. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

The tenth battle of the Isonzo surpassed all previous Isonzo battles in its intensity. Artillery played a major role on both sides, and the Italian ‘curtain barrages’ caused huge numbers of casualties and damage to Austro-Hungarian positions. One historian maintains that the prolonged intense artillery fire wore out the barrels or mechanisms of over 500 canons.⁵⁰⁵ The Italians’ enormous losses were everywhere evident. Schalek reports:

At night two patrols go out looking. They say it’s gruesome out there. ‘Every shell hole is full of corpses. You get sick just from the stench.’ In the evening the deserters confirm it. The losses are boundless.⁵⁰⁶

Austro-Hungarian units, too, were ripped to pieces. In another passage that combines heroism with brutal honesty, Schalek describes a successfully defended Austro-Hungarian position:

Overcome with awe I look at the positions that are no more. A pair of stout hearts – quiet, silent heroes – have defended Austria-Hungary on this terrible slope.⁵⁰⁷

One of the issues Schalek was struck by in this battle was the terrifying effect of mortars in infantry battles. Her last report from the Tenth Battle covered her visit to forward positions on ‘the ridge between the hotly contested heights of Karste and San Marco.’⁵⁰⁸ These positions, she said, had been ‘incessantly bombarded with [Italian] mortars.’⁵⁰⁹ For Schalek, mortars represented a further escalation in the war, that ‘wore down morale ... like no other weapon.’⁵¹⁰ Mortars (called *Minenwerfer* – ‘mine-throwers’ - in early 20th century German) were small to medium sized, portable artillery pieces that fired a grenade-like bomb in a short trajectory with a near-vertical fall. They had no rifling in their barrels so the projectile did not spin during flight and give a warning of its path by ‘singing’ as it flew through the air. They could be fired at close range, and fell vertically into the enemy’s trenches. Schalek writes:

You have to live through mortar fire to grasp what it means... For the most terrible thing is not what you see or hear or think, but what it does to your nerves. The most disturbing thing about a mortar shell is that you don’t hear it coming. First comes the mind-numbing shock [of its being launched]. Then you pull yourself together and look about for the shell. The weird thing is that you see it flying. It opens out like a shuttlecock. Its wings stand out clearly against the sky. It flies in a low arc, wobbling clumsily, without any targeted aim.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁵ Simčič: 2003, p. 127.

⁵⁰⁶ Schalek: Die Kote**, NFP, 15. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁰⁷ Schalek: Die Kote**, NFP, 15. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁰⁸ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der zehnten Isonzoschlacht. Die Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵⁰⁹ Schalek: Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵¹⁰ Schalek: Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵¹¹ Schalek: Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 2-3.

To Schalek, the use of mortars meant that the Italians ‘could pursue their daily acts of murder at close range without having to use hand grenades or rifles.’⁵¹² It was, she thought, a cheap and safe way to inflict damage on the enemy without exposing oneself to danger. She fails to mention that the Austro-Hungarians also had mortars – just as she earlier criticised the Italian use of poison gas without mentioning its use by her own side.

Finally, Schalek reported how the battle looked from divisional headquarters, well behind the lines. One again she was struck by the enormous difference just a few kilometres behind the front line. As she had previously noted, here one would hardly know there was slaughter and terror just down the road:

The most astonishing thing about the whole battle is the quiet behind the enormous front where there’s continual artillery fire, attacks and counter-attacks. Anyone who imagines this battle as turmoil and confusion would be completely surprised by the reality.⁵¹³

The last sentence is an odd comment, as Schalek herself has just described zones of the battle as something akin to turmoil – the German word *Getümmel*, which she uses here, is a common description of battle. Most likely she is saying, in the same breath, that the Austro-Hungarian commanders have the battle fully under their control, and that there is a kind of denial at headquarters of the real suffering and terror of the battlefield. This would accord with her earlier protestations that the reality of the trenches is simply not evident more than a few kilometres away from the front line.

While Schalek was facing increasing criticism on the home front, her efforts were deeply appreciated and supported by General Borojevic and his officers on the Isonzo. As she prepared to leave divisional headquarters, a leading (unnamed) officer asked her to praise his soldiers in her reports:

‘Write only how loyal our people are. Write it as warmly as you can. I admit it’s not possible to come near to reality with words. Write how wonderfully loyal our troops are. Write “wonderfully loyal.”’⁵¹⁴

The German word we translate here as ‘loyal’ is *brav*, a word for which there is no direct translation into English. It can mean obedient, well-behaved, not given to mischief, courageous. It is often used of school children who do what they are told and study hard. In some ways it is a tragic word, as it denotes the major quality troops had to show in the First World War to keep the front lines intact and therefore keep the slaughter going. It has nothing to do with initiative, flare, self-preservation, or a healthy critical spirit. In some ways, Schalek herself was *brav*, as she faithfully reported the heroism and willing sacrifice of her country’s soldiers as they did the bidding of their generals. In this respect she supported the war effort and probably contributed, in a small way, to the prolongation of the war. But Schalek did not stop at being *brav*. As we have seen, she published much

⁵¹² Schalek: Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵¹³ Schalek: Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵¹⁴ Schalek: Wippachstellung, NFP, 21. June 1917 (MB), p. 3.

of the ugly truth of the front line and frequently spoke of her mission to disturb the quietness of the home front with the horrible realities of the trenches. She went even one step further, adding her criticisms – both veiled and overt – of the war itself and of leading politicians' commitment to it. Her report of the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo is itself a vivid and disturbing revelation of the noise, smells, fears, terrors and human tragedy of a monstrous battle.

Chapter Thirteen: See how they run: Schalek on the Russian front

By the end of 1916 Russia was reeling internally with social and political turmoil. Early in 1917 unrest over the material deprivation caused by the war came to a head. When the military garrison at Petrograd refused to quell the disorder and sided with the agitators, the unrest swelled into a revolution. On 2 March⁵¹⁵ 1917 (15 March in the western calendar) Tsar Nicolas abdicated. Though the sentiment behind the revolution included socialist elements, the Bolsheviks were at this stage manoeuvred out of holding any power in the post-revolutionary Provisional Government, and Lenin remained in exile in Switzerland.

In Russia there was widespread sentiment for making a separate peace with the Central Powers, irrespective of the wishes of the other Entente countries. Nevertheless, members of the Provisional Government were aware of the weakness of the Russian army and their consequent paucity of negotiating power with the enemy. The army was largely disillusioned with the war, desertion was rife, and those who remained at the front often simply refused to go into battle or surrendered *en masse* at the first opportunity. Workers' committees ('soviets') were now well established within army units, as they were throughout the country. A consensus began to form amongst the leadership that Russia's best hope lay in one last, massive offensive to weaken the enemy before offering to talk of peace.

On 5 May (Julian calendar) Alexander Kerensky became Minister of War. Kerensky had impeccable socialist credentials but was thoroughly committed to the war effort. He immediately set about purging the high command of defeatist elements. General Alexei Brusilov, who was Russia's most successful commander and who had mauled the Austro-Hungarians in Galicia in 1916, became Kerensky's Chief of Staff. Kerensky sent commissars to the front with the mission of stirring the troops to fight one last offensive, with the odd-sounding message that to get peace they would have to get back to war.

Despite hesitancy by many units the offensive was launched in mid-June, initially against Austro-Hungarians in Galicia, toward the southern end of their eastern front. The aim of the attack was to take Lemberg, where Brusilov had challenged the Habsburgs a year earlier. At first the offensive went well for the Russians, who gained ground as Austro-Hungarian resistance faded. Once again, however, the Germans came to Austria-Hungary's rescue, counter-attacking with divisions they had transported across from the western front. The combined German and Habsburg force recovered all lost ground and pushed the Russians further back than their start line.

Alice Schalek arrived at the front in Galicia just before the start of the Kerensky Offensive and filed six reports on the life and experiences of the troops in and around the

⁵¹⁵ This is on the Julian Calendar, which Russia used until 1918. It was 13 days behind the Georgian (western) calendar during the 20th century.

battle zone. The Austrians were commanded by Field Marshall Eduard Freiheer von Böhm-Ermolli, who, unlike Boroevic and his generals on the Isonzo front, did not become a personal acquaintance of Schalek. Indeed, some of her reports from this theatre have a more distant, detached tone than her earlier writings, and she was not positioned close to the fighting troops when the fighting first broke out.

In her first article Schalek reports her impression, as a person used to world travel, of the feeling of encirclement by front lines on every side of the Central Powers in the conflict that ‘our enemies have forced us into.’⁵¹⁶

Only at the Great Wall of China have I had a similar feeling of crashing into a prison wall. In the face of these monstrous barriers, that appear to me to be the products of a great madness, this enormous kingdom is shrunken to the size of a dungeon. The ancient barrier is child’s play compared to the new one the 20th century has lain around our land. It’s like a box of toys compared to the barrier of trenches that unleash hell upon us – and that ‘cultured nations’ are using as ‘a means of liberation.’⁵¹⁷

Schalek remains consistent in her claim that the war is the fault of the Entente - the ‘cultured nations’ - and that the Central Powers have been forced into it and must fight for their lives. Further, her feeling of encirclement was widely shared within the Central Powers. One of Germany’s motives in entering the war was to strike against its encircling enemies so as to relieve the feeling of being trapped between them. Doing so, of course, simply roused them to fight back, thus intensifying the sense of entrapment.

After the February revolution, Germany and Austria-Hungary had held back from military offensives on the eastern front in the hope of negotiating a separate peace with Russia. If they could achieve this, they would free up millions of troops for deployment on the western front and would be in a better position to strike a knockout blow against the French and British, before the Americans arrived in great numbers. Even after the Kerensky Offensive started, this hope remained alive. It is probably for this reason that Schalek writes of a somewhat conciliatory attitude towards the Russians. She noticed, she said, ‘not a spark of hate against the Russians in our army.’⁵¹⁸ Rather, she heard ‘respect and recognition wherever the enemy was spoken of.’

By contrast, she said, on the Isonzo front, where ‘the second year of fighting has now moderated the hatred to a large degree,’ one still feels ‘disrespect for the conniving immorality [of the Italians], ... hatred over the incessant torment.’⁵¹⁹

Another contrast with the Isonzo front was the landscape. Battles were fought in much wider, more open spaces, with a far lower ratio of troop concentration and destructive

⁵¹⁶ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵¹⁷ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵¹⁸ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵¹⁹ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

power per square kilometre. Further, unlike the rocky, chalk-based earth on the Isonzo, here there was a deep layer of topsoil:

You don't see the devastation. The shell holes don't remain long in the black, soft earth and the region is too vast to have had all the trees pounded away.⁵²⁰

Like the Isonzo, the eastern front left traces of past battles everywhere, especially the 'countless cemeteries.'⁵²¹ But even these differed from those on the Isonzo:

But this too was different from the shattered cemeteries of the south, where the poor heroes were never granted their last rest. Here the graves lie quietly, in the deep reverence of the forest, clean and well cared for.⁵²²

Schalek maintained that, as the theatre of war she had just come from was so strongly etched into her memory, the eastern front seemed tame by comparison:

If you've just come from the Isonzo, a lot here seems 'good,' when in fact it's terrible.⁵²³

Schalek's trademark as a war correspondent was her detailed descriptions of the daily life and environment of the front line soldiers, usually embellished with her personal feelings about her subject matter. She now applies this skill to the Galician front line. One of the daily needs of the army was transport, both within, and to and from, the forward positions. Schalek saw the ingenious makeshift roads (*Prügelwege* – 'cudgelpaths') as a 'praiseworthy achievement',⁵²⁴ in such swampy, poorly drained land. She explained:

First they dig two water canals. Then they stamp all the loose earth into an embankment between the canals. Then they lay three parallel rows of timber logs along this track – one on the right, one on the left, and one in the centre. They lay smaller logs across these at right angles and secure them with iron brackets. Every single log vibrates under the vehicle rolling across it.⁵²⁵

Despite her admiration for the army's road building flare, Schalek criticised her country for failing to build any roads in the area until now, and that they were not built 'as connections from village to village,' but only for the war effort. This echoes her earlier criticism of the war as a waste of resources – though previously it was the waste of young men's lives she was criticising.

In her second article Schalek reported on a visit to the trenches, which she described as 'labyrinthine, built by the book',⁵²⁶ and likened them to a *Kriegsaustellung*⁵²⁷ – an

⁵²⁰ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²¹ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²² Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²³ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²⁴ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), S. 2.

⁵²⁵ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²⁶ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

exhibition of war technology. She also compared them to the positions in Tyrol and on the Isonzo:

The line in the black earth is laid as in a sketchbook. The trench is dug four metres deep and lined with branches, boards, concrete and even grass turf. The floor of the trench is made of a chain of interleaving planks, and a groundwater channel is dug out underneath.⁵²⁸

The barbed wire barriers, too, were set out according to regulations. 'They were nowhere like the confused tangle of metal spikes thrown up out of the trenches on the Isonzo.'⁵²⁹ It was a surprise to Schalek to find that these defences were 'neat, clean, pegged to the earth in rows.'⁵³⁰

But even the neatest engineering was no match for the elements. The next day, after heavy rain, Schalek returned to the trenches and found extensive damage and pockets of complete destruction:

Whole sections of cover have been torn away. The plank floors have been swept away in places. Water roars through the trenches like a stream. The black earth is sunken. Water has swept through and many dugouts have collapsed.⁵³¹

Schalek now found herself unimpressed by the positions in Galicia and complained that 'these trenches have such a comfortless monotony that it's almost unbearable.'⁵³² Nevertheless she believed she saw in the army of General Böhm-Emolli the same courage and willingness to make sacrifices as she had seen on the Isonzo. The engineering may leave a lot to be desired, but:

As you walk through the bleak and dreary infantry trenches, the only pleasing thing is the proud expressions on the faces of the men. What they've lived through is written in their eyes. Each man knows for himself that he's proved he's the master of his will, ... that he can be stronger than his own urge to live. Each man knows what's coming. Each man is prepared. A deep, inner quiet lies over the Galician front. Each man here believes in himself.⁵³³

No doubt this was exactly the kind of message the generals wanted to hear. The army, it seemed, was courageous and committed to a man. In fact, until the Germans intervened in strength, this army was beaten in days by the nerve-shattered remnants of the reluctant Russians. We are led to ask, did Schalek really believe her report? Was she doing her best to perform her loyal duty? Or did she by this time have such affection for the troops that

⁵²⁷ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²⁸ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵²⁹ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵³⁰ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵³¹ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵³² Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. I., NFP, 6. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵³³ Schalek, Alice: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. II., NFP, 18. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

she could only see them as heroes? As we shall see, her view would change markedly after she witnessed the first retreat of the Habsburg troops.

Schalek's next report covers the beginning of the Russian offensive, the first phases of which she was able to observe only at some distance along the lines well back from the fighting. Just before the offensive began the commander of the German forces on the eastern front, Prince Leopold von Bayern, visited the Austro-Hungarian forces. He was greeted by a regimental parade, in which he called the troops to defend against what was expected to be the last great Russian offensive. Schalek, who often showed great admiration for top military men, was caught up in the 'excitement' of the occasion:⁵³⁴

Everyone here feels this is the crossroads of fate. The Russians are making this one last push. They got it together with great difficulty. Only hold fast! Don't waver!⁵³⁵

During her tour along the front, from which she was 'always ten kilometres distant',⁵³⁶ Schalek noted once again how different it was from the Isonzo:

The battle has begun on the horizon. I've never seen anything like it. Great stretches of ripening fields in front of me. Endless quiet over the sea of maize. And on the rim, where the fields lose themselves in the sky, rise pillar after pillar of smoke. I hear nothing, not a shot, not a shell burst. Here we're too distant to hear either the firing or the explosions. The black earth of Galicia doesn't crack and rumble like the rocks of the chalk country when it's pounded by dynamite.⁵³⁷

The battle was also spread over a far wider area than was possible in the valleys and ridges of the Isonzo. Here it was:

Not as thick as in the south, where everything happened in a small arc, concentrated on specific fulcrums... There isn't the roar, the rage, the crack and splitter, the echo and the dust of the Isonzo battles.⁵³⁸

As the battle raged Schalek considered the political motivation that lay behind it. The responsibility for it lay not with the Russians, she said, but with British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Lloyd George, she said,

... had reproached Russia that England, France and Italy were defending Russian freedom while Russia sat watching the threat of its revolution and did nothing.⁵³⁹

Schalek was no doubt echoing a popular view, as she could not have known at the time that the Russian leadership saw it to be in Russia's own interest to mount one last great

⁵³⁴ Schalek, Alice: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵³⁵ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵³⁶ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵³⁷ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵³⁸ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵³⁹ Schalek: *Bilder von der russischen Front*. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

offensive before suing for peace. Even after a peace treaty was signed between the Russians and the Central Powers, local disturbances in the occupied Russian territories continued to tie down hundreds of thousands of German troops who would otherwise have been redeployed to the western front.⁵⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the British never gave up their commitment to seek a conclusion of the war that would see all German gains in Russia eradicated. In that sense, Schalek was right to see the hand of the British in the ongoing war in the east. She criticised Lloyd George sharply and said she wished ‘... the writers of future war history’ were present, to experience the telling of ‘baiting, talking round, blackmail, kidnap and violence ... as it has never happened before,’ and to report how an ‘exhausted, indifferent people [i.e. the Russians] who hated no-one ... were being whipped to their deaths.’⁵⁴¹

She is referring to the Kerensky’s mission of persuasion to the Russian troops, to make one last stand in battle. But she is putting the blame for it at the feet of Lloyd George.

Up to this point Schalek was seeing the battle from afar. But now the reality of its suffering came to her, as the wounded began to arrive at a first aid post she was watching events from. She wondered at the stretcher-bearers, who did their ‘inglorious, terrifying work’ knowing that they could ‘die at any moment.’⁵⁴² Now her criticism begins to range broader than the Entente, as she aims it more generally, at the people of all the warring powers. In Vienna, she recalled, ‘no-one wants to hear of the war any more,’⁵⁴³ and this, she said, was the main reason it continued:

The war has lasted three years. There are millions of people who have no idea what it’s like. And what tortures me, what makes me suffocate, is the thought that this is one of the reasons it persists. Because millions don’t see it, there’s still war after three years.⁵⁴⁴

Despite her persistent support for the efforts of the troops, despite her stated view that Austria-Hungary was the innocent party in the war, despite her consistent praise of Habsburg soldiers as heroes, Schalek never wavered from her belief that the war would end if people on the home front knew how horrific it was. She therefore saw it as her mission to describe its ugliness in no uncertain terms for her readers. This was not the aim of the War Press Office. Their mission was to paint a positive view of the front line so as to maintain public support for the war. No matter how heroic the troops fared in her reports, Schalek was on a collision course with the War Press Office.

The Austro-Hungarian army, already showing signs of disintegration, was pushed back by the Russian onslaught.⁵⁴⁵ Though Schalek was well behind the initial front line, she

⁵⁴⁰ See the discussion in Stevenson, 2004, p. 399.

⁵⁴¹ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁴² Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁴³ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁴⁴ Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁴⁵ Rauchensteiner: 1993, p. 482.

found the battle coming to her when the Russians broke through to the village of Koninchy. In her next article she reported:

It's now clear the Russians have reached Koninchy. There's already shooting here. There's fighting all round the perimeter of the village.⁵⁴⁶

Schalek maintained that her presence was valued by the troops. The commander of the division she was attached to greeted her, she said, with the words:

It's absolutely right that you're here. The reporter must always be in the midst of it. Otherwise she can't report anything.⁵⁴⁷

Schalek would have valued this confirmation. It came at about the same time that an *Interpellation* – a petition by parliamentary representatives – was being brought against her in the *Reichsrat*, the Parliament of the Austrian half of the empire. Schalek was aware of the petition and might well have suspected it was one of the reasons she was posted so far back from the front line on this assignment. She might also have been keen to report evidence that justified her ending up in the midst of the fighting troops, which seems to have happened despite the generals' intentions.

As she had done several times in the past, Schalek now attempted to write up the defeat as a mere tactical move by her country's army:

The war against Russia is not the same as that which hammers against the living wall of bodies that protect Trieste. Here it's not a big issue to lose a village. You simply withdraw two kilometres. In the big picture that's not much. You don't hang your heart on a position like Koninchy, as you do, for example, on Gorizia. Why sacrifice people needlessly? Seal the line and close ranks. That's the unique tactic on the Russian front.⁵⁴⁸

In speaking with captured Russian troops Schalek found out more about the mood in the Russian army. A Russian lieutenant colonel told her the troops were tired of war and no longer prepared to start an offensive against Austria-Hungary. 'We entreated the soldiers for two months,' he said. 'They didn't want to. Finally they gave in – but they said it was the last time.'⁵⁴⁹ Although he denied 'that there are foreign troops and officers among the Russians,'⁵⁵⁰ Schalek once more blamed Russia's allies for the continued war on the eastern front, and asked:

Will the anger among our people disappear – the anger caused by the French, English and Japanese stirring up our neighbouring peoples against us?⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁶ Schalek, Alice: Bilder von der russischen Front. In Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁴⁷ Schalek: Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁴⁸ Schalek: Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁴⁹ Schalek: Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁵⁰ Schalek: Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁵¹ Schalek: Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 1.

As we have already seen, Schalek sought in her reports from the eastern front to play down hostility toward the Russians, most likely to help prepare the public mood for a separate peace with Russia. It suited her to have public anger for the latest casualty lists directed at the other entente powers. She concluded:

The next time, hopefully, the Russians won't come against us. And soon we'll be bound in friendship with the Russian people.⁵⁵²

Schalek's last report from the Russian front (published in two instalments a month after the event) covered the battle at Brzezany. By this time the Germans had taken command and supplemented the Austro-Hungarian army with their own and Turkish divisions, and the Russians were not able to break the line.⁵⁵³ In the first instalment she described the start of the Russian offensive, which opened 'on Sunday 1 July at eight in the morning'⁵⁵⁴ with a heavy artillery bombardment. Once again she sought to shift the blame for this murderous barrage onto Russia's allies:

The terrible opening barrage was executed according to the French pattern. On the first day they fired 50,000 shells, including 6,000 gas canisters. Some of it was poison gas, some tear gas. It's the first time they've used gas here. That shows the influence of western culture. The Russians have never used anything like it before.⁵⁵⁵

As we have noted, the social upheavals in Russia had spread to the army, and even now that the bulk of its units had been persuaded to attack, there was widespread indiscipline. Commands were ignored, tens of thousands were deserting. Some estimates put the number of soldiers who abandoned their units between March and October at around one million.⁵⁵⁶ Schalek added her own words of criticism of this Russian indiscipline, noting that even when troops won ground they often began plundering and looting, and failed to consolidate their gains. She comments:

No amount of tactics, strategy, organisation, machinery, use of steel and high explosive, planning by the leaders, or even the contribution of English and French experience make any use of the Russians' fighting power.⁵⁵⁷

Rather, the Russian attitude was that 'plundering got them the rewards they now deserved,'⁵⁵⁸ and this would, she said, always give the Austro-Hungarian troops the opportunity to 'seal the line' where the Russians had punched through the front. Doing so, however, was a very costly action for the Austro-Hungarian troops:

⁵⁵² Schalek: Koninchy, NFP, 26. July 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁵³ Rauchensteiner: 1993, p. 481.

⁵⁵⁴ Schalek, Alice: Die Schlacht von Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁵⁵ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵⁵⁶ Cf.: Figes, 1998, p. 403-405.

⁵⁵⁷ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁵⁸ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

It is impossible to explain what this phrase ‘seal the line’ means at such a moment, after three days of artillery barrages, countless dead and wounded soldiers, with so many taken prisoner and the threat of panic hanging over the rest. It’s impossible to portray how much sacrifice is hidden in such a phrase.⁵⁵⁹

It is noteworthy that Schalek was able to write, and have published in a leading Viennese newspaper, the assertion that ‘the threat of panic’ was hanging over the army. This was exactly the sort of press the leading generals did not want for their troops. It is probably Schalek’s most direct reference to the deteriorating morale of the Habsburg armies, yet it comes at a time when the authorities have made a point of stationing her well away from the front line. They obviously had not reckoned with the possibility of the front line caving in and the action surging forward to the point where she had been stationed, and where she could observe the troops directly.

Why does she report that these troops are near to panic, while in two major battles on the Isonzo front she consistently painted the soldiers as stoical heroes? The line was more stable on the Isonzo front and she never found herself in the midst of a retreat. As we previously noted, Borojević’s army was better led, more disciplined, and more highly motivated than any other Austro-Hungarian force. It was by far the most successful of Austria-Hungary’s armies and lasted two and a half years against a much larger attacking force before calling for German help. Borojević’s impact on the Slovenian side of the Isonzo was such that he is still remembered today, in local oral tradition, as a truly great man. Elderly folk in the region whose parents and grandparents fought in his army talk about him with affection and pride. ‘The troops loved him,’ they say.⁵⁶⁰

The army in Galicia was near to panic and Schalek reported this fact faithfully. Her purpose in doing so, as she says, was to let people on the home front know what really lay behind the expression ‘seal the line’ (*abriegeln*). She was, in effect, telling them how to interpret the sanitised reports of other official war correspondents and the directly quoted press releases of the army high command. One might say she was deliberately setting out to be subversive. Her mission was to let the ugliness of the battlefield be known. The article was published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 8 August 1917, just three weeks before she was dismissed from the War Press Office.

Schalek now turns her attention to the fighting in the forest. This was completely new to her, and she describes it as ‘the most horrible of the most horrible.’⁵⁶¹ In contrast to action the mountains, troops in a forest could easily lose their sense of direction and orientation:

⁵⁵⁹ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁶⁰ Conversation with elderly residents of Kanal, a village on the banks of the Isonzo, 24 January 2006 (R.G.). The sentiment was echoed by staff of the war museums in Nova Gorica (New Gorizia) and Kobarid (Carporetto).

⁵⁶¹ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

In the forest you don't know where forward is, where rear. The shells come and you don't know whether they're your enemy's or your own... The situation can change in a second. Only the tension remains the same.⁵⁶²

Even advancing was hindered by 'huge uprooted tree trunks.'⁵⁶³ The soldiers had to 'clamber forwards ... as in a primeval forest. Neither advance nor retreat could be swift.'⁵⁶⁴

In the second half of this article, published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 9 August, Schalek continued her description of the battle and described the retaking of lost ground. In this article she spoke at length about the fear of the soldiers. Apart from her mention of near panic in her previous article, she had seldom explored this theme:

It's strange that fear rises when the [artillery] barrage lets up. To be afraid, you have to have time. When your thoughts are fully occupied fear finds no place to lodge. But when a moment of quiet comes and you don't know what will happen next, then you often lose your inner composure. Then you start wishing for your own death, just so that the strain on the nerves will end.⁵⁶⁵

This is a far cry from her early reports of the troops in Tyrol, written two years earlier. There the soldiers were like noble figures in a great painting, full of zest for the war and hoping it might never end. Here they are very frail human beings, shell-worn, wishing for death so as to escape the nerve-wracking fear of death.

But the Russian army, she noted, was in an even worse state. 'Most of them are drunk,'⁵⁶⁶ she said – despite the prohibition of alcohol in Russia's units at the front. Further, she blamed the Entente powers for pushing unwilling and unprepared Russians into this battle:

Now the Entente drives drunken men to their deaths, men who have no idea what they're doing.⁵⁶⁷

A further witness to what she ironically called 'western humanitarianism'⁵⁶⁸ was found in a discovery at an Austro-Hungarian field dressing station that had been overrun in battle and then recaptured: 'three wounded soldiers on their stretchers – stabbed to death.'⁵⁶⁹ 'The Russians,' she said, 'had never done such a thing previously.'⁵⁷⁰ Strangely, she is blaming the western powers for the Russian's murder of the Austro-Hungarian wounded. She seems determined to excuse Russia for all its sins and blame them on Britain, France

⁵⁶² Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁶³ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁶⁴ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁶⁵ Schalek, Alice: Die Schlacht bei Brzezany, NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵⁶⁶ Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁶⁷ Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁶⁸ Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁶⁹ Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁷⁰ Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

and The United States. It is impossible to say whether this line was the policy of the War Press Office or her own attempts to smooth the way for a peace with Russia.

As a last example of what she claims is western influence on the Russians, Schalek notes their refusal to give pause in the battle so that the dead could be buried:

And that's a western development. Formerly the Russians always requested and allowed a few hours of peace for this sad activity.⁵⁷¹

Finally, Schalek gives a touching picture of the scene after the battle, where the wary Austro-Hungarian soldiers put thoughts of their own needs aside and make it their top priority to write to their mothers:

They all sit there, as dirty as when they came, and write. They all write to their mothers, even those who've left a wife and child, a bride or a lover at home. No one worries about them so much as a mother. Then they fall upon the mail, three days old, then on their pay. Only then do they bathe and eat.⁵⁷²

Schalek's reports from her brief assignment on the Russian front are, like many of her previous reports, a diverse mixture. As always, her desire to extol the moral virtue of the Austro-Hungarian troops comes through clearly, though here belatedly, with their unselfish act of writing to their mothers before looking to their own needs. Secondly, Schalek's interest in engineering is shown in her detailed descriptions of the army's makeshift roads and carefully built trenches in the deep, soft Galician soil. Thirdly, Schalek takes every opportunity to excuse the Russians for their offensive, for their brutality and for their ineptitude, blaming these entirely on the western powers. And finally, she makes what seems to be an honest attempt to describe the battle as she saw it, with its widely spread out front, its soft, absorbent ground surface, its terrifying forest action and the nerve-shattered, barely functioning troops of the Habsburg empire.

This was her last report from a battle zone (her next and final wartime article was on life in Trieste). The authorities seem to have attempted to keep her well away from the action, but the course of the battle put paid to that. Amidst the terror and confusion of coping with Russian breakthroughs, she witnessed and faithfully reported the frayed nerves and near panic of the Austro-Hungarian troops.

Those in Vienna who were struggling to keep the lid on the news must have been annoyed, if not aghast. Not only did she let the public know that the army was near to panic. She also told readers how to put truth back into the sanitized press reports that littered the news. In her first report from the Isonzo she had started this personal mission:

⁵⁷¹ Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁷² Schalek: Brzezany [Part 2], NFP, 9. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

Battle! – what an expression! Victory! – what a summary! Men are dying – that’s what lies behind these words. Do we realise that? That each of these words encompasses thousands of fates?⁵⁷³

Read behind the lines, she had implied, to see the deaths and the blood-letting. And now, from the Russian front, she educated her readers about the phrase ‘seal the line.’ It meant ‘countless dead and wounded soldiers, with so many taken prisoner and the threat of panic hanging over the rest.’

Despite her patriotism, her admiration of generals, her eccentricities and her willingness to incorporate official reports into her narratives, Schalek wanted desperately for her people to know the truth of the battlefield. It would be, she said repeatedly, the surest way to stop the war.

⁵⁷³ Schalek, *Am Isonzo*, p. 1.

Chapter Fourteen: A last word from Trieste

After her assignment on the Russian front Alice Schalek reported on the city of Trieste, arriving there, it would seem, late in July 1917. An important question hangs over this last ‘assignment,’ and it is worth looking closely at the records before describing it.

Schalek’s one and only article⁵⁷⁴ from this phase was published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on 24 August 1917. As we shall see, the events it described took place over a long period of time, including the previous Advent season, many months earlier. The battle of Brzezany, which she had just reported on in Galicia, took place from 3 – 21 July, and she seems to have been there until its latter stages, when previously overrun Austro-Hungarian positions were being recaptured. On the face of it, then, it seems her visit to Trieste – if indeed there was one - must have taken place from late July until mid or late August.

However, there is an entry in the staff log book of the War Press Office under her name that covers this period. It reads: ‘12/7 to lecture in Karlsbad until 15/8.’ (*21/7 zum Vortrag nach Karlsbad bis 15/8*).⁵⁷⁵ This seems to imply that the clerk responsible for keeping the log book up to date believed she was going to Karlsbad on 21 July, to lecture until 15 August. The War Press Office’s staff log books tend to be incomplete, their entries covering only a portion of journalists’ moves. Karlsbad was a health and spa centre in what is now the Czech republic, and it is possible she was going there to have a holiday, give a lecture, or both, then be free until 15 August. However, what the log books do record diligently is journalists’ moves from one army group to another. Schalek was assigned to the 5th Army Command (*‘zum 5. A. K.’*)⁵⁷⁶ during her time on the Isonzo front and transferred to the 2nd Army Command (*‘zum 2. A. K.’*) for her Russian front assignment. These moves are recorded in the log books. *But there is no record of her being reassigned to 5th Army Command before heading back to Trieste.* During these few weeks she was still part of the 2nd Army, the army that was fighting in Galicia. What, then, was she doing in Trieste? On the face of it, it seems she was there without permission, reporting on a war zone to which she had not been assigned.

There is, however, one point that could be brought against this line of reasoning. The entry in the log book recording her transfer to the 2nd Army reads *‘18/6 auf Exc. zum 2.A.K.’* The term *‘Exc’* is almost certainly an abbreviation for an Austrian (mis-)spelling of *‘Exkursion,’* which means ‘trip’ or ‘outing.’ In other words, while on the Russian front she was on a kind of temporary secondment to the 2nd Army, and presumably she still belonged institutionally to Boroevic’s 5th Army. So, in a sense, in travelling to Trieste she might not have been encroaching on territory that was not her own. Nevertheless, the log book does not record any permission to go to Trieste, but does give a crystal clear

⁵⁷⁴ Schalek, Alice: *Triest im Kriege*, NFP, 24. August 1917

⁵⁷⁵ *Präsenzstand der Mitglieder des k.u.k. Armeekommandos – Kriegspressequartier 1914 – 1918*, Book 2, entry section No. 73, in *Kriegsarchiv (War Archive)*, Vienna.

⁵⁷⁶ *Präsenzstand der Mitglieder des k.u.k. Armeekommandos – Kriegspressequartier 1914 – 1918*, Book 1, entry section No. 79, in *Kriegsarchiv (War Archive)*, Vienna.

reference to a time to be spent in Karlsbad from 21 July to 15 August. Nor does it give any indication that her secondment to the 2nd Army is over.

Further, in this report from Trieste she does not write at all about direct encounters with army officers or enlisted men. Instead, most of her comments are about women's charity groups, some of which already had connections with the troops. The evidence leads to two possible conclusions. The first is that Schalek took herself to Trieste unofficially, while officially on leave (or semi-leave) from her command, namely 2nd Army Command. It might have been perfectly legitimate for a person on leave to travel to a city of their choice under their own steam and write an article for a newspaper. But for an accredited war correspondent, who was by definition officially attached to a specific army group, this would have been seen as mischievous, at the very least. Getting involved in very personal charity work with the troops would have made her look even more suspect. Given that Schalek knew there was a formal complaint against her at this time, she would have been very foolish to hive off to Trieste and act outside the ranks. If the top brass had been looking for an excuse to get rid of her, this would have handed them one on a silver platter.

The more likely conclusion is that Schalek stayed in Karlsbad and wrote the article from there. While parts of the article do presuppose an immediate eyewitness account, some of what it describes can only have taken place many months before she wrote it.

Trieste was the goal of the Italian army, the prize it had sought for over two years of bloodletting. By late July 1917 the Italians had broken through yet another line of Austro-Hungarian defences and were pressing into the plains that head south down the eastern side of the Gulf of Trieste toward the city. Schalek noted in her article that they were no more than a one hour drive away. Schalek reminds her readers of the importance of Trieste to the Habsburg Empire, an importance the Austro-Hungarians had come to value all the more highly since the war began:

The city was a transport hub for us. From here we used to travel to Venice, Corfu, Alexandria. And now! Now the view, full of feeling, takes in this lovely picture. Our Trieste! Yes, now ours, because other hands reached out for it and we bought it with our blood. We had to earn it, to possess it. Only now do we recognise how much it is worth to us.⁵⁷⁷

Schalek compared the inhabitants of Trieste to those of Gorizia, and admired the courage that had kept them in the city despite repeated air raids:

In one month alone they were attacked by 97 bombers. But the schools are still open. 26,000 children continue their lessons, while often whole stores crash down. Among 160,000 Triesters, 30 have been killed.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁷ Schalek, Alice: *Triest im Kriege*, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 1.

⁵⁷⁸ Schalek: *Triest*, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

Schalek was particularly interested in the contribution of women in Trieste, whose ‘work and care, money and resources, good sense and intelligence are the force behind the courageous stoicism of the city,’⁵⁷⁹ and noted their willingness to donate money to soldiers’ causes:

The women of Trieste sent the soldiers not only x-ray equipment, beds, blankets and pillows, but also a portable cinema. A coffee house with billiard table, playing cards and newspapers. A garden swing, tea kettles, gramophones and pianos. The soldiers’ quarters are equipped with games: chess, draughts, mill,⁵⁸⁰ dominos.⁵⁸¹

Schalek also noted a special Advent project in which it had been made possible for each soldier to send a photograph of himself to his family:

But the cheeriest Christmas gift ... was the mobile photographic studio. 60,000 pictures were sent to mothers as postcards. Two vans were used. One was the darkroom, and the pictures were developed on the spot.⁵⁸²

As July and August do not include Advent, this action must have taken place many months earlier, while Schalek was reporting from the Isonzo front. There would have been time between her 1916 and 1917 Isonzo assignments for her to observe it.

Schalek spoke in this article of a further problem that had arisen as a result of the war: many children had lost their parents and become orphans. To look after these children ‘a new concept of a women’s board in Trieste’⁵⁸³ had been founded. She gave a detailed description of its work:

Each woman takes personal charge of an orphan. At the meeting she explains what talents, what failings, what desires ‘her’ child has. One needs a sewing machine, another needs drawing lessons. Each is helped individually. 200 German, 100 Italian, 80 Slovenian women are now caring for 2000 children. After every battle on the Isonzo the number of children and their foster mothers grows. The aim is to prevent the helpless orphans falling below their usual standards. No lad from Trieste has had to drop out of middle-school on account of his father’s heroism.⁵⁸⁴

The measure of success the citizens of Trieste achieved in coping with the war was shown, in Schalek’s view, by their independent administration of the distribution of food and essentials. She noted that ‘in Trieste everyone gets the necessary minimum of what they need for their existence,’⁵⁸⁵ and that this ‘minimum’ consisted of not only ‘bread,

⁵⁷⁹ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁸⁰ ‘Mühle.’ A board game with small circles positioned in rows of three on concentric squares.

⁵⁸¹ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁸² Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁵⁸³ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁸⁴ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁸⁵ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

fat, flour, sugar,' but also included 'meat, soap, firewood, jam, sweetcorn, legumes, eggs, tobacco, coal, milk, cheese and sausages.'⁵⁸⁶

One is inclined to doubt the abundance reported here. By July 1917 there were scarcities in Austria-Hungary of even the most essential commodities. Even bread was rationed. Food riots were not uncommon in the cities. Trieste is not situated in a large food growing area. The countryside round about is rugged, the soil chalky. The Entente's blockade of the Mediterranean, though not as tight as its blockade of Germany, would have interfered with supplies coming by sea. There may have been some 'meat, soap, firewood,' etc. trickling into Trieste, but certainly not enough to go round. Schalek is almost certainly engaging in propaganda – but rather clumsily, as her own readers in Vienna were among the most deprived in Austria-Hungary. It would not thrill them to know that others were eating well, bathing and keeping warm, while they were freezing, filthy and starving.

Schalek hoped that the cooperative spirit she found in Trieste would exist also in peacetime, and that in the future Trieste would be even more strongly bound to the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Monarchy. She appealed to Austrian and German firms to help with reconstruction of the city, and looked forward to a bright economic future:

It's clear what the city needs: a major bookshop, a shop for fine hats, gloves, garments. A German beer hall is needed. A bakery for cakes and pastries, a wine bar, theatre, elegant hairdresser. These would be splendid. Also, taxi car firms for the tourism we can expect, as our allies would rather visit our Riviera than Italy's.⁵⁸⁷

In this her last report as a war correspondent Schalek repeats some of her favourite themes. She notes the bravery of the soldiers, that has enthused her since the beginning of her war reporting. She criticises the paucity of love for the homeland, that has been awakened only since the war began. She especially praises the engagement of women, who, she believed, were working to make the suffering more bearable. She expresses the hope that her people would work hard for the Fatherland in peacetime too, and not, as she had always felt, only for their own personal advantage.

What are we to make of this somewhat domestic article, pale in comparison to her last incisive reports from the Russian front and the raw honesty of sections of her Isonzo journalism?

In part, it is understandable that Schalek would want to tell her readers of the impressive work being done by women for the war effort on the Isonzo front. As we saw in one of her first Isonzo reports from 1916, she praised the service work of civilian women in shell-battered Gorizia in glowing tones. After the war she would write more and more of the lives, struggles and aspirations of ordinary women in both developing and developed

⁵⁸⁶ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

⁵⁸⁷ Schalek: Trieste, NFP, 24. August 1917 (MB), p. 3.

countries throughout the world, and less and less of men.⁵⁸⁸ It is highly likely that she visited Trieste more than once during and between her Isonzo assignments, and could easily have made connections there with women's groups and observed the Advent postcard photos initiative. As these experiences did not fit in well with her battlefield reports, it would make sense to write them up during a break in Karlsbad.

Meanwhile, as we have noted, at the time the Trieste article was being written there was a complaint against her on the floor of parliament. This might also have motivated her to get something innocuous published before the outcome of the complaint was decided – something supportive of the war effort, optimistic about its outcome, and devoid of her more controversial themes.

We need not conclude, then, that she actually visited Trieste to write this article. Her notes and memories would give her plenty of material to be able to write it from afar. How it was received, however, is another matter. If her transfer to the 2nd Army had been an attempt by commanders to get her away from the Isonzo theatre, the Trieste article might well have annoyed them, perhaps even angered them. On the other hand, she might have written it in Karlsbad with their full approval. It is, after all, innocuous, non-specific, patriotic, and naively optimistic about the Central Powers' prospects for winning the war.

It was the last article she ever wrote as an accredited war correspondent. Exactly one week after it was published she was dismissed from the War Press Office. We will now examine the implications of this intriguing turn of events.

⁵⁸⁸ Kransy, Elke, 'Tempeltänzerin und Berufsfrauen: von Frauen in der Fremde,' in Kransy, Rapp, et.al, *Von Samoa zum Isonzo*, 2000, pp. 37-48.

Chapter Fifteen: Down but not out: Schalek's dismissal

On 1 September 1917 Alice Schalek was dismissed from the War Press Office. The hand-written entry in the staff log book is in larger writing than the usual tiny scrawls, and is followed by an exclamation mark. It reads simply *'Entlassen!'* - 'Dismissed!' No explanation is given. The file to which this entry refers is missing: there is no sign of it amidst the letters, papers, memorandums and assorted documents in the *Kriegsarchiv*, the War Archive, in Vienna. We have looked in vain to find any specific written explanation as to the definitive reasoning behind Schalek's dismissal. There must have been a memorandum or exchange of letters between senior military staff to make the case for such a drastic move. However, the headquarters of the War Press Office was shifted many times during the war, and much of its documentation has been lost.

Even if we had a definitive memorandum, however, it would still be of value to explore the likely impact of Schalek's writing and lecturing within the communities of those who read it, listened to it, discussed it, and were influenced by it, and to see how this could have led to a call for her dismissal. To some extent we have been doing this throughout this book. We will now attempt to pull the threads together.

The War Press Office was founded⁵⁸⁹ on 28 July 1914 by its first director, military historian Major General Maximilian Ritter von Hoen. Schalek was initially accredited to the War Press Office on the recommendation of Austrian war minister Schönauf. She developed a warm and trusting, though respectfully distant, relationship with the major general, which appears to have been supportive for her as she coped with the strain of Karl Kraus's very public antagonism, misogynist opposition in the community, and reactions against her vividly revealing battlefield reports, not to mention the immense stresses of being frequently under shellfire and small arms fire on the front line. We catch a rare glimpse of the way she saw her relationship with von Hoen in the inscription she hand wrote, in the copy of her book *Am Isonzo*, that she gifted to him when it was published.⁵⁹⁰ It reads:

In unending, never fading gratitude
to my mentor, supporter and generous hearted commander
Major-General R. Von Hoen
with deepest respect and admiration
Alice Schalek
Vienna, 6th December 1916

As in her relationships with a number of men towards whom she felt positive, there is here a respectful distance, an admiration bordering on reverence, with just a touch of warmth. This seems to have been her preferred mode of relating to men. She appears to

⁵⁸⁹ The War Press Office (*Kriegspressequartier*) was concerned with the release of press reports, the organisation of public lectures and promotional tours of accredited journalists, the assignments of these journalists, and providing advice for press censorship in Vienna and Budapest. See Broucek, 1989, p. 136.

⁵⁹⁰ This copy is now in the *Kriegsarchiv*, the War Archive, in Vienna.

have had little time for what she called the ‘simple’ man, but kept on good terms with a number of prominent and influential men in the Austrian military, social and political spheres. As a single woman who never showed any intention of marrying, this was a sensible strategy, especially since she aspired to traditionally male roles in employment and recreation but could not defend herself as readily as men could in such a society.

In March 1917 von Hoen was transferred out of the War Press Office to work as director of the War Archive. His replacement was Colonel Wilhelm Eisner-Bubna, a general staff officer who had served, ironically, under Borojevic when the latter was commander of the 3rd Army on the Russian front. Eisner-Bubna reorganised the War Press Office and rationalised its resources.⁵⁹¹ At first he allowed Schalek to return to the Isonzo front – probably at the request of Borojevic – but on 18 June 1917 she was transferred to the 2nd Army, on the Russian front, without any of the close personal contact with senior officers she had enjoyed on the Isonzo.

It is reasonable to speculate that without von Hoen’s patronage and Borojevic’s support, Schalek was now in a vulnerable position. Further, the War Press Office was now made into a department of the *Armeeoberkommando*, the Military High Command. This gave General Franz Conrad von Hoetzendorf, the Austro-Hungarian chief of staff, more direct say in its affairs. Leading military figures had long wanted war correspondents to work more directly for the High Command, as was the case in Germany. Correspondents, then, were losing the independence and freedom that their ‘father’ von Hoen had afforded them.⁵⁹² Alexander Roda Roda, the macho star of the press corps, whose articles were published even in Entente newspapers, resigned in protest.

It is just possible that Schalek’s transfer to the Russian front was an attempt by Eisner-Bubna to give her another chance. Getting her out of the Isonzo would separate her from the scene of her growing emotional attachment, and putting her well back from the action would deprive her of ugly carnage to write about. She was, after all, a popular columnist with a ‘name’ stretching back some twelve years. But it did not work out that way. When the rain came down she gave an accurate description of the soggy wreckage of the carefully prepared defences, and when the army retreated, near to panic, she again let the cat out of the bag.

Eisner-Bubna was probably also influenced by the fact that a complaint had been brought against Schalek in parliament. This ‘*Interpellation*,’ as it was called, was a device used by deputies in the *Reichsrat* to force a cabinet minister to act. In this case, a group of members of parliament complained that the minister of defence was allowing a war correspondent to publish destructive material in regard to the war effort. It was technically a complaint against the minister, not against Schalek herself, but if it had been upheld the minister would have been strongly advised to sack her.

The interpellation was brought before the *Reichsrat* in July 1917 by Christian-Socialist (conservative) politicians. The ground of the interpellation was Schalek’s lecture, ‘Three

⁵⁹¹ See: Paupié: 1996 p. 151.

⁵⁹² Rapp, Christian, ‘Das Ganze is so grandiose orgnaisiert’ 1999, p. 33.

months on the Isonzo,' which she had given in Innsbruck in December 1916. The lecture had 'raised a huge dust storm, and many people took offence at it.'⁵⁹³ The content of the lecture was 'a concoction of sensation-seeking and overheated nosiness.'⁵⁹⁴ Schalek's involvement with her material was 'a lust for adventure driven by the most primitive instincts of an insane female.'⁵⁹⁵ The politicians complained that 'this un-woman was living out her desire to be emancipated in the columns of a newspaper'⁵⁹⁶ by working as a war correspondent, and requested that 'female sensation-seeking and lust for adventure would in future be kept well away from the sphere in which men take up their duty, with joy, to suffer for the Fatherland and even to die, if that be their fate.'⁵⁹⁷

The complaint was making three points, though they were somewhat muddled: 1. A woman was engaged as an accredited war correspondent; 2. This particular woman was over-involved emotionally with her work; and 3. She was not behaving as a woman should: she was an 'un-woman' (*Unweib*), and was trying to be emancipated. Notably, the interpellation does not mention any specific crime or misdemeanour, such as speaking in too much detail about the suffering of the troops.

The minister of defence responded, after some delay, in matter-of-fact, emotion-free language and simply gave his opinion as to the legitimacy of having a woman in the War Press Office:

According to the current regulations, newspapers are free to nominate war correspondents for the War Press Office. There is no restriction with regard to their sex.⁵⁹⁸

The interpellation therefore failed. Its sole rational basis was that Schalek was not a man, and the minister of defence responded quite simply that according to the regulations her sex did not disqualify her. It was late September when he gave this response. But by that time, Schalek had already been dismissed. The interpellation cannot have been the direct cause of her dismissal, though the fact that it was in progress might have given the generals impetus to act.

Further, the interpellation was not generally supported in the Viennese press. The *Arbeiterzeitung* (Workers' News), for example, claimed to value Schalek's reports as a war correspondent and declared that there was 'no mischief' in her work.⁵⁹⁹ The paper expressed its belief that Karl Kraus was the force behind the interpellation, and continued:

But this complaint, made by shirkers from the home front, is nothing but naked brutality, and falls down because it does not (as it is claimed) originate from the

⁵⁹³ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Die Zeit, 26. September 1917, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁴ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Die Zeit, 26. September 1917, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁵ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Die Zeit, 26. September 1917, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁶ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Die Zeit, 26. September 1917, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁷ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Die Zeit, 26. September 1917, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁸ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Neues 8 Uhr Blatt, 27. September 1917, p. 2.

⁵⁹⁹ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Arbeiterzeitung, 28. September 1917, p. 4.

undersigned Messers Maixner, Höher or Jadek. They have better things to do than worry about the state of Fräulein Schalek's soul.⁶⁰⁰

Schalek, too was suspicious about who or what lay behind the interpellation, suggesting it might be motivated by the jealousy of a rival war lecturer. She wrote to General von Zeidler, commander of the forces that had defended Gorizia:

The complaint purports to come from none other than farmers from tiny villages – signed by pub owners, barmen, bull breeders, firemen, who have of course never read or heard a word from me – with the exception of Baron von Panz, whose own public lectures on the front had so little success. Now he's chosen this most original way to kill off the competition!⁶⁰¹

Kraus, aware of the accusation that he was the force behind the interpellation, responded with characteristic sarcasm. He said he was not, 'unfortunately,' a member of parliament so could neither have brought the interpellation nor signed it.⁶⁰² While Kraus had carved out a safe niche for himself as a satirist, and had the unusual status of being able to publish almost anything he wished to, it is very unlikely that he had any direct influence on the military chiefs who would be deciding Schalek's fate.

Why, then, was Schalek dismissed? We can safely say the answer has nothing directly to do with the fact that she was a woman. Nor was Karl Kraus behind it. The answer must be seen in the nature of Schalek's reporting. We will therefore consider, once again, the themes that develop in her war writings.

Schalek was a sophisticated writer with a background in fiction and travel journalism. She was very skilled at weaving themes together, and at times the reader is lured in by what at first appears to be a straightforward (but often gripping) narrative, only to find that some strong emotional theme – often to do with the horror of war - has been lurking there all along and rises up vividly out of the text at the end of a passage. So it would be somewhat misleading simply to list the themes that come through in her writing, as if these were held in separate compartments. She can be writing very patriotically about heroic Austro-Hungarian soldiers, but then suddenly we find that the (enemy) Italian soldiers are heroic too.⁶⁰³ Or she can be giving a description of an Italian artillery attack on her hotel, and the narrative metamorphoses into a tribute to the courage of women.⁶⁰⁴ A song in praise of foot-soldiers becomes a revelation of the horrors they have to live with,⁶⁰⁵ and a casual remark about the bombing of Venice is found, on reflection, to carry implied criticism of her country's conduct of the war.⁶⁰⁶ In this summary, then, the reader

⁶⁰⁰ Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek, M09B/L137792: Arbeiterzeitung, 28. September 1917, p. 4.

⁶⁰¹ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to General von Zeidler, Meran, June 1918.

⁶⁰² Kraus, Karl, 'Die einzelne Frauengestalt,' in *Die Fackel*, Nr.462-471, 9 October 1917, p. 137ff.

⁶⁰³ Schalek, 'Eine Mondnacht auf dem Monte Sabotino,' in *Am Isonzo*, p. 34.

⁶⁰⁴ Schalek, 'In Görz,' in *Am Isonzo*, p. 14-17.

⁶⁰⁵ Schalek: Plava, NFP, 27. July 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁶⁰⁶ Schalek: Krieg in den Lüften, NFP, 19. January 1916 (MB), p. 3.

must not suppose that all the themes referred to are to be found distinct and separate in her writings.

Keeping in mind the above cautions, it is useful to think of the themes in Schalek's war correspondence in four main categories: 1. Patriotic themes that would have been seen as entirely supportive of the war effort; 2. Matter-of-fact reporting, that simply informs readers as to what the front line was like, but that drifts, at times, into descriptions and observations that would have provoked horror and distaste; 3. Themes that challenged or reacted negatively to the war, to its terrors, to its effects on people and to the politics that drove it; and 4. The invisible made visible: women, nature, refugees, supply troops.

Patriotic themes.

From the beginning of her war reporting to its end, Schalek saw herself as a loyal citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This is given almost unbridled expression in her reports from her first assignment, in the breathtaking alpine countryside of Tyrol. A dominant theme in these writings – which she dropped after her brief assignment in Tyrol but which most of her detractors today strongly associate with her – is that *war is a wonderful adventure*. The brilliant organisation of the army leads her, she says, 'to feel nothing other than a kind of diabolical enjoyment.'⁶⁰⁷ Adventurousness, she says, has taken hold of the troops 'and they taste the thrill of danger.'⁶⁰⁸ These soldiers, she says, 'all shudder before the thought of returning home.'⁶⁰⁹ War was like an endless Sunday holiday.⁶¹⁰ This theme reaches its zenith where she says, of the war: 'I call it liberated humanity.'⁶¹¹ While Karl Kraus latched onto this expression, interpreted almost everything else she said in the light of it, and used it to damn her, it represents a view that she quickly dropped when she saw the devastation of war in later months. Nevertheless, the propagandists in the army high command would have loved it.

Alongside this theme was that of *the morally inferior enemy*. Italians, she asserted repeatedly, were dirty and unhygienic,⁶¹² and their habitual lack of punctuality let them down on the battlefield.⁶¹³ These themes appear throughout her writings, and the filthy state of some captured Italian trenches on the Isonzo reinforced her view. She also shared, or helped to foster, a hatred of the Italians – or at least of their war effort – a view which she also maintained throughout her war journalism career. As we have seen, she revived this theme while on the Russian front, contrasting the hatred felt toward the Italians with the conciliatory feelings she saw toward the Russians. She saw the Serbs, too, as morally inferior, ridiculing their architecture and the lack of decoration in Belgrade.⁶¹⁴ She also wrote of the contrast between the courage of the 'Dalmatian'

⁶⁰⁷ Schalek: Tirol, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 2.

⁶⁰⁸ Schalek: Tirol, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 3-4.

⁶⁰⁹ Schalek: Tirol, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 3-4.

⁶¹⁰ Schalek: Tirol, NFP, 21. August 1915 (MB), p. 3.

⁶¹¹ Schalek, Alice: Dolomitenfront, NFP, 7. September 1915 (MB), p. 5.

⁶¹² Schalek, Alice: Tiroler Bergführer, NFP, 7. July 1915 (MB), p. 2.

⁶¹³ Schalek: In den unerlösten Gebieten, NFP, 17. August 1915 (MB), p. 2-3.

⁶¹⁴ Schalek: Die Erstürmung, NFP, 21. Oktober 1915 (MB), p. 1.

soldiers and the weak nerves of the Italians,⁶¹⁵ a sentiment that General Boroëvic pressed upon her in their first meeting on the Isonzo front.

Schalek did, however develop considerable respect for Italian soldiers during her time on the Isonzo. As we saw, in one very moving passage she describes a soldiers' cemetery under construction on the Isonzo. A captured Italian stone mason has volunteered to make the huge memorial stone, because not only Austro-Hungarian soldiers will be buried there, but also 'Italian heroes.'⁶¹⁶ In other passages she speaks with great respect for the front line Italian soldiers, often pitying them for the incompetence of their high command. So, even her patriotic disparagement of the enemy becomes moderated, as time goes on, by her actual experience of Italian troops.

Her patriotism is also displayed in her frequent, and steadily increasing, *criticism of the leading Entente powers*, particularly Britain, France, Japan and later the United States. The U.S., she claimed, was the force behind the Italian use of poison gas on the Isonzo.⁶¹⁷ Japan, France and Britain were goading the reluctant Russians to one last bloody assault on the Eastern front.⁶¹⁸ Russia and Montenegro, too, came in for criticism in her earlier writings, for the crude financial deal they made to form an alliance against Austria-Hungary.⁶¹⁹

But the most steadily patriotic theme, running evenly through her reports from beginning to end, is *the heroism of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers*. Indeed, this theme is so ubiquitous in her writings that one could quite happily print them all in one volume under the title, *Tales of Austro-Hungarian Heroes*. These brave soldiers suffer the daily deprivations of life at the front for years on end. They run through machinegun fire, live night and day under murderous artillery barrages, endure wind, cold, heat, flies, lice, filth, and the constant sight and stench of rotting corpses. On the face of it, no propagandist military chief could ask for more. And yet this tale of heroism comes at a price. To prove they are heroes, she also has to (or chooses to) depict the terrors, horrors, fears, pains, deaths, stresses and degradations they face. In a large proportion of her 'heroism' passages the emphasis is just as much on the terrors of the battlefield as on the courage of the men who face them.

There is no doubting the patriotic and at times jingoistic streak in Schalek's war journalism. She was employed to support the war effort and in this way she did so. But even in this most propagandist aspect of her reporting, one can see motifs that would make the more ardent supporters of the war effort uncomfortable.

Matter of fact themes

Much of Schalek's writing is plainly descriptive, at least on the face of it. She uses words to paint clear, informative pictures of life on the front line. Even today, with so many

⁶¹⁵ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁶¹⁶ Schalek, 'Eine Mondnacht auf dem Monte Sabotino,' in *Am Isonzo*, p. 34

⁶¹⁷ Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. Juni 1917 (MB), S. 3.

⁶¹⁸ Ebenda, S. 1.

⁶¹⁹ Schalek: Ein Idyll, NFP, 23. Dezember 1915 (MB), S. 3.

books available on the First World War, the reader can still learn a great deal from her writings about how things were in the war zones. She gives telling insights into such everyday realities as the geographical constraints of various front lines, the daily routines of soldiers in the trenches and artillery stations and at rest, how life was under both sporadic and incessant shell fire, how the wounded were evacuated, what the various shells and mortars sounded like as they flew through the air, how troops coped in snow and ice, how supplies were brought to the front line, what happened to all the corpses, the sorts of humour that developed in war zones, what a massive artillery barrage looked like, how enemy soldiers were perceived, what men did on submarines, how artillery stations triangulated their targets. Her lengthy account of everyday life in Gorizia while it was being destroyed, piece by piece, by Italian shellfire has to be one of the great classics of First World War reporting.⁶²⁰ Indeed, the editor of the recent Slovenian translation of *Am Isonzo*,⁶²¹ Mitja Mocnik, told us his motivation for publishing the book is that it gives such a detailed and authentic account of daily life in the conflict that was so formative for Slovenia's political future.

Among war correspondents Schalek was unusual, particularly in her Isonzo assignments, in being permitted to spend lengthy periods of time right in the midst of the front line, and to move to and fro among virtually all aspects of the military apparatus. Her descriptions have a ring of authenticity, and correlate well with other eyewitness accounts – most of which were published after the war. Almost all other news reports of the war were in broad, general terms: the number of divisions, the amount of ground gained, the strategic significance of the battle. Schalek's however, paid little attention to strategic issues but told readers how things looked and felt from inside the battle zone.

But this authenticity was a two-edged sword. While it made her reports uniquely informative, it also revealed much of the truth about what the war was really like. This was not generally what the leaders wanted, in any of the warring nations. Schalek's descriptive skills and close proximity to the fighting would have made many in the Austro-Hungarian leadership wary of her.

Themes of terror and ugliness

Schalek's descriptions of the front line almost always spilled over into *sights of ugliness and terror*. As early as her Montenegro assignment⁶²² this tendency begins to creep in. The climate and the terrain, she says, are 'the most powerful allies of the enemy.' The Montenegrin guerrilla fighters 'creep up at night' undetected and throw grenades into Austro-Hungarian trenches. They 'massacre the wounded,' force 'hand to hand combat,' like 'half-wild primeval forest heroes.' On the Isonzo, she says, 'No-one knows if they'll still be alive tomorrow.'⁶²³ In the trenches soldiers have to wade 'through excrement and mud,'⁶²⁴ cope with the stench and sight of thousands of corpses,⁶²⁵ live in collapsing

⁶²⁰ Schalek, 'In Görz,' in *Am Isonzo*, p. 14-17.

⁶²¹ Schalek, Alice, *Posjec: marec do julij 1916*, prvedel Albin Trobec, spremna beseda Mitja Mocnik, Ljubljana 2005, Karatanija.

⁶²² Schalek, Alice: An der montenegrinischen Grenze, NFP, 14. November 1915 (MB), p. 2-3.

⁶²³ Schalek, 'In Görz,' in *Am Isonzo*, p. 14-17.

⁶²⁴ Schalek: Auf dem Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

⁶²⁵ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 24

ditches, in pitiful squalor,⁶²⁶ while ‘the enemy lobs shells at [them] day and night without letup,’ and with ‘never a break for the nerves.’⁶²⁷ Suffering such a battering, plus searing thirst, the men would ‘love to be free; they’d love to go home. These men have become old ... the youth has been washed from their eyes ...’⁶²⁸ The entire hill of Oslavia, she says (amidst the glory of a gorgeous spring day) has been so viciously fought over for so long that it has turned a colour which is a ‘cross between the colour of sulphur and the tan of clay and the skin of a corpse.’⁶²⁹ The sight of it, she says, ‘gnaws my heart out of my body.’ And on the Russian front she openly states that there are ‘countless dead’ and that the ‘threat of panic’ is hanging over the rest of the Austro-Hungarian troops.⁶³⁰

Apart from the ‘threat of panic,’ these sentiments are repeated constantly in her writings, all the more so as time goes on. She also states, explicitly, that she *wants the public to know* how bad it is. The very first page of her book, *Am Isonzo* makes this clear. The book opens with an account of a woman in a bookshop in Vienna, who refused to look at any book about the war. ‘No, please,’ says the woman, ‘nothing about the war.’ Schalek immediately complains that ‘we don’t hear enough’ about the war. The official press reports, i.e. the ‘terribly brief words ... stand like a wall before us. Battle! – what an expression! Victory! – What a summary! Men are dying – that’s what lies behind these words.’ ‘Of those who are alive today, many will be bleeding to death tomorrow.’⁶³¹ Schalek wants the public to know about the deaths and the blood. She says this clearly at the start of the book to indicate that this is the purpose of the book – to show her people how ugly and horrible the war is for those who are doing the fighting. This is her overriding mission, right to the end. In her last battlefield assignment, with the threat of an parliamentary enquiry hanging over her, she persists with it:

The war has lasted three years. There are millions of people who have no idea what it’s like. And what tortures me, what makes me suffocate, is the thought that this is one of the reasons it persists. Because millions don’t see it, there’s still war after three years.⁶³²

And so she persists. She takes one of the much-used phrases of military press jargon, ‘seal the line’ – *abriegeln* – and tells her readers what to think of when they see it in the press: countless dead and wounded, prisoners, the threat of panic.⁶³³

Another motif in this vein is the view that *the war is a bad thing in itself, and must be stopped*. As we have seen, before Schalek became accredited as a war correspondent, her reports from the Skoda factory and the scrap metal collection showed reservations about the war. She secreted away one of the shrapnel balls destined for an artillery shell, commenting: ‘... perhaps I’ve - God condemn me! – saved a Russian life. But I can’t

⁶²⁶ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 19. April 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁶²⁷ Schalek: Podgora, NFP, 20. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁶²⁸ Schalek: Die vorderste Linie, NFP, 21. June 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁶²⁹ Schalek: Oslavia, NFP, 24. May 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁶³⁰ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8 August 1917, p.2.

⁶³¹ Schalek, ‘Im Hauptquartier,’ in *Am Isonzo*, pp. 1-4.

⁶³² Schalek: Bilder von der russischen Front. III., NFP, 24. July 1917 (MB), p. 2.

⁶³³ Schalek: Brzezany, NFP, 8 August 1917, p.2.

regret that.⁶³⁴ Alongside this is her hope, expressed at the metal collection, that ‘this Rosita [zinc doll] may be shrapnel only for a short time, for we’d rather produce Rositas than shrapnel.’⁶³⁵ Then, in her first war assignment, she complains ‘how insensitive and callous this year of war has made human souls,’ as ‘the world has got used to reading of a thousand deaths in one sentence, then going to dinner and sleeping peacefully.’⁶³⁶ In her next article she complains, ‘This is war. That’s the great excuse for standing on a million graves and thinking only of “life as usual.”’⁶³⁷ When she first sees and experiences the destruction in Gorizia, ‘war,’ she says, ‘appears to me in its unspeakable madness,’ and she suggests that war ‘is demanding that which nobody wants.’⁶³⁸ The next day she bemoans the fact that ‘fashionable gents of former days’ now ‘have only one thought: attack, destroy, annihilate.’⁶³⁹ A few days later, she declares that a newly dug soldiers’ cemetery (for both Italian and Austro-Hungarian ‘heroes’) is ‘the saddest patch of ground in the world.’⁶⁴⁰ In seeing the medics at work in a field hospital she makes the ironic observation: ‘All that civilisation has contrived, is put to use to repair the damage that the failure of civilisation has brought forth.’⁶⁴¹ When she is about to watch an infantry attack on a bridge at Tolmein, to the north of the Isonzo area, she declares that ‘war is nothing natural, nothing organic, nothing necessary. Woe, to him three times woe, to him who thinks otherwise.’⁶⁴² A year later, watching an artillery barrage from an observation post, she observes, ‘In the midst of this dance of hell sit human beings. The picture is too appalling to take in.’⁶⁴³

Admittedly, the motif that the war in itself is an appalling evil is not as persistent in her writings as are her descriptions of the terror and ugliness of the battlefield. But it still appears with a fairly even frequency throughout her work, and there is no letup to her revealing descriptions of the war, even while she is the subject of a parliamentary enquiry.

Schalek knew she was under suspicion but she continued to bend the rules and report the truth, offering subtle criticism of the official style of war reporting along the way. Given the personnel changes in the War Press Office, the general tightening of press censorship at the time, and the fact that the Germans were taking charge more and more of the Austro-Hungarian military, it is not surprising that Schalek’s days as a war correspondent were numbered. She simply could not give the generals what they wanted. Such silence ‘tortured’ her. Though we have no explicit records as to why she was fired, it is safe to conclude that it was for this reason.

The invisible made visible

⁶³⁴ Schalek: Der Krieg als Umwerter, in: Almanach des Kriegsjahres 1914-15, p. 132.

⁶³⁵ Schalek, Alice: Die Kriegsmetallsammlung, NFP, 9. Mai 1915 (MB), p. 17

⁶³⁶ Schalek, Alice: Stadt und Festung Belgrad nach der Einnahme, NFP, 23. Oktober 1915 (MB), p. 1.

⁶³⁷ Schalek: Stadt und Festung, NFP, 23. Oktober 1915 (MB), p. 4.

⁶³⁸ Schalek: Görz, NFP, 7. April 1916 (MB), p. 2.

⁶³⁹ Schalek: Beobachtungsstand, NFP, 12. April 1916 (MB), p. 4.

⁶⁴⁰ Schalek: Mondnacht, NFP, 14. April 1916 (MB), p. 1.

⁶⁴¹ Schalek: Von der Front, NFP, 17. May 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁶⁴² Schalek: Tolmeiner Brücke, NFP, 10. August 1916 (MB), p. 3.

⁶⁴³ Schalek: Großkampftag, NFP, 5. June 1917 (MB), p. 4.

There is a further group of Schalek's themes, that would have been of little consequence either way to propagandists, but that are interesting in their own right: the role and value of women, the humble supply troops, Austro-Hungary as a multi-racial society, the dilemma of soldiers on home leave, and the persistence of nature's wonder amidst the destruction of war. We will look more closely at these themes in our next and final chapter, on Schalek's legacy as a war correspondent.

Life after dismissal

Schalek was deeply hurt by her dismissal. In October 1917, five weeks after her sacking, she wrote to von Hoen:

Whether or not what you've promised me will turn out to be feasible and successful, that's not the issue. The issue is – and I must thank you for it once again – that there are good, true, trustworthy people. For if you are there, there must be others. And that gives me courage and the joy to go on working. I had lost faith in humanity. In you, as often previously, I have found it again.⁶⁴⁴

We have no record of what it was that von Hoen had promised. Perhaps he sought a role for her at the *Kriegsarchiv*, or was willing to intervene on her behalf to the War Press Office. Whatever it was, circumstances seem to have put paid to it, as Schalek underwent a major operation in October and was then ill for the best part of a year. In June 1918 she wrote to von Hoen:

As a result of all these bitter attacks, my health, already shaken by the strains of lecturing and of the war, has completely broken down.⁶⁴⁵

Records of the particular illness, or set of illnesses Schalek suffered, have been lost. She was a very robust person and we presume it was a mixture of physical and psychological stresses that brought her health so low.

During this period, however, she attempted to redeem her reputation with the (now crumbling) Austro-Hungarian Empire, by applying for a further military decoration. In February 1917 she had been awarded the *Goldene Verdienstkreuz mit der Krone am Bande der Tapferkeitsmedaille* ('Gold Service Cross of Valour'), a mid-to-high ranking decoration, in recognition of her battlefield investigative reporting, much of it at great personal danger.⁶⁴⁶ In March 1918 she applied for the *Schwerter* (literally 'swords'),⁶⁴⁷ a much coveted decoration that would enhance her *Verdienstkreuz* and provide, in her words, 'satisfaction for injustice suffered.'⁶⁴⁸ In her application she cited 60 situations where she had been under heavy fire, and was supported by 13 signed witnesses,

⁶⁴⁴ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, 7. October 1917.

⁶⁴⁵ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to General von Zeidler, Meran, June 1918.

⁶⁴⁶ The citation can be found in the Austrian *Kriegsarchiv* in Vienna.

⁶⁴⁷ Vgl.: Rapp: 'Das Ganze ist so grandios organisiert...', in: Krasny (Hrsg.), 1999, p. 31.

⁶⁴⁸ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), No. 1: Letter from Alice Schalek to General von Zeidler, Meran, June 1918.

including three army commanders, two ministers and three Knights of the Order of Maria Theresia.⁶⁴⁹ Six weeks after making her application she explained her motivation in a letter to von Hoen:

It will be the final reward for much honest toil and suffering in my poor shattered life, and after this experience I am fearful that some other intrigue will follow on and add to the foul play.⁶⁵⁰

It was not usual for people to apply for a military decoration, and from Schalek's comments here it appears that a large part of her motivation was to pull together a protective network of influential people (the signatories) as a means of deterring more intrigues against her. But her chief motivation was simply to effect compensation for the injustice of her being dismissed. It was a very unhappy time for her. She wrote to von Hoen:

I'm not at all well. From spending so much time lying down my whole body is plagued with rheumatism and I can only walk and lie with difficulty. I'm completely alone here and the weather has been very hard these last few weeks. So my mood is somewhat less than rosy.⁶⁵¹

She was suffering 'pains' and 'immobility,' and described herself as 'a wreck, unfit for work, with no joy or lust for life.'⁶⁵²

It got worse. On 15 June 1918 she was informed that her application for the *Schwerter* had been unsuccessful. She reacted angrily, telling von Hoen:

The whole affair is a transparent miscarriage of justice. I will not let it rest. Either I'll go directly to the Emperor and tell him all, or I'll launch my own interpellation. But I'm settling accounts with the War Press Office. What's too much is too much... I'm so deeply incensed and so strongly roused that I'm hoping with absolute certainty for something to come of my intention to retaliate.⁶⁵³

She also wrote a letter to General von Zeidler, who had commanded the division defending Gorizia. She sent the letter first to von Hoen,⁶⁵⁴ asking him to pass it on, but he advised her not to proceed with it. She accepted his advice. In the letter she had detailed

⁶⁴⁹ Vgl.: ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter to Alice Schalek an General von Zeidler, Meran, June 1918.

⁶⁵⁰ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter to Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, Meran, 16. April 1918.

⁶⁵¹ Ebenda.

⁶⁵² ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter to Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, Meran, 16. April 1918.

⁶⁵³ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter to Alice Schalek to Generalmajor Ritter von Hoen, Meran, 16. April 1918.

⁶⁵⁴ ÖSA, KA: Legacy Hoen (B/46), Nr. 1: Letter to Alice Schalek to General von Zeidler, Meran, June 1918.

her activities in the war, outlined why she felt she deserved the *Schwerter* and suggested the reasons it had not been awarded her. She also complained of Karl Kraus's constant personal attacks, maintaining that she had not 'pursued bravado or the thrill of adventure in the midst of danger,' but that she had 'followed the clear goal of producing books and giving lectures.' She had always 'worked as commanded,' and the Minister of War, von Stöger-Steiner, could bear witness that 'my climbing of Krn, Mrzli Wrch and Hill 588 was essential for the writing of my book and the preparation of my lectures.' (Stöger-Steiner had been, at the time, commander of the northern, alpine section of the Isonzo front.) The Minister of Education had 'recommended my lectures as well-suited to education' and Emperor Karl I himself had said 'I thank you for what you have done as publicity for my army. I thank you for your courage.'

Her efforts were unsuccessful. As far as we can tell, they were greeted with stony silence. After she retired, in 1934, she made one last attempt to get the official recognition she felt she deserved. This, too, fell on deaf ears.

When the war ended Schalek returned to her profession as a travel journalist with the *Neue Freie Presse*. Her first post-war article was on the subject of democracy and appeared in December 1918, only weeks after the Armistice. It was entitled 'America and Australia – citizens' social democracies.' Austria was metamorphosing into a republican democracy, and Schalek was quick off the mark to offer her people a feel for such a society. As in many of her articles for the first few years after the war, she drew on past experiences of global travel. With Austria now suffering extreme poverty, Schalek was not able to resume her world travels until 1923, when she went to Japan. Later she visited South America (1924-25), India (1928), the United States (1930), Africa (1931) und South East Asia (1935), publishing her articles in both the *Neue Freie Presse* and the *Berliner Illustrierten Zeitung*.⁶⁵⁵

The last year of the war went badly for Schalek, but she recovered, returned to her profession and pursued it successfully until her retirement. Her wartime career, however, left an important legacy, a legacy that, through peculiar twists of fate, has largely been ignored. We turn now to examine it.

⁶⁵⁵ See: Krasny, et. Al., 1999, p. 15.

Chapter Sixteen: Alice Schalek's Legacy

In 1979 Second Presbyterian Church, New York, was looking for ways to raise money to renovate its organ. The pastor, Reverend James Spence, remembered that nearly 30 years earlier an elderly church member named Alice Schalek had gifted the church a collection of over thirty photograph albums containing 6,000 black and white pictures. The photos came from all over the world – the Middle East, North Africa, East and Southeast Asia, India, Australia, New Zealand, South America, the Pacific Islands, Africa, the Balkans, the Mediterranean. Handwritten notes in the albums told the year and location of each picture. The photos spanned the period 1903 to 1935. The members of the church felt the albums could be of value and decided to sell them to help fund their project. Spencer offered them to New York's Natural History Museum, but the museum found only a small portion of them interesting. The albums were put up for auction, but did not reach their reserve price. They were then shown to the New York Institute for Austrian Culture, where, co-incidentally, Dr Johann Allmayer-Beck, Director of the Vienna Museum of Military History was visiting. Allmayer-Beck saw the albums, recognised their value and wrote to Dr Walter Wieser, Director of the Austrian National Library, in Vienna, with a recommendation to purchase. He explained:

These photographs are in excellent condition throughout, and many have informative comments appended. They represent a photographic record of the world over the first half of our century, a comprehensive record that is not easy to come by in one collection.⁶⁵⁶

Alice Schalek had died on 6 November 1956 in a rest home near New York City. If it were not for the photograph albums and a chain of events they triggered she might well have been forgotten – except as a rather despicable character in one of Karl Kraus's plays. However, from June to September 1999 the Jewish Museum in Vienna held an exhibition of Kraus's newspaper, the *Fackel*, to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of its founding date. The noted Kraus scholar Sigurd Paul Scheichel, Professor of German Studies at Innsbruck University, was invited to speak at the exhibition's opening. Scheichel began his speech by asking whether it would not be appropriate for one and the same museum to hold an exhibition of Alice Schalek's work, as she was Kraus's 'most striking satirical creation.'⁶⁵⁷ He ended his speech with the challenge to the museum to 'display Vienna's entire Jewish heritage in its many-sided shades and contradictions,' even if this might be 'a stumbling block for Kraus purists.'

The museum's director, Karl Albrecht-Weinberger, had already envisaged such an exhibition. It opened in November 1999, only a month after the *Fackel* exhibition ended. It was made up almost entirely of the photographs redeemed from New York's Second Presbyterian Church. In time for its opening a team of scholars produced a small volume

⁶⁵⁶ Dr Johann Allmayer-Beck to Dr Walter Wieser, Director of the photograph archive of the Austrian National Library, 10 December 1979. Quoted in Krasny, et. al., 1999, p. 9.

⁶⁵⁷ Quoted in Albrecht-Weinberger, 1999, p. 7.

of articles⁶⁵⁸ giving the background to Schalek's thirty year career as a photojournalist and the major events of her life. The exhibition should, wrote Albrecht-Weinberger, 'call back again into history a figure whom Kraus had in one sense culturally and media-wise assassinated.'⁶⁵⁹ Schalek, he said, was a self-aware, many-sided person who in no way fitted Kraus's conservative, gender-stereotyped picture of her.

Nevertheless, Albrecht-Weinberger supported the prevailing view that Kraus was 'absolutely right to damn her glorification of war.' Once again, Schalek the war correspondent was condemned to be viewed as a naïve, jingoistic propagandist.

At first sight it seems extraordinary that Albrecht-Weinberger and his team of scholars came to this conclusion. On closer examination, though, the reason is obvious: they did not look in detail at any of Schalek's wartime writings apart from her early reports from Tyrol. These reports, from her first four weeks as an accredited war correspondent, are her most jingoistic and also her most readily available. They were bound together to form *Tyrol im Waffen*, the first of her two wartime books. Almost twice as many copies of this book were printed as of her collected Isonzo articles of 1916. Her Isonzo articles from 1917 and her reports from Serbia, Montenegro and the Russian front exist only in their original form, as newspaper articles, hidden away in the national archives. As we have already noted, anyone who reads only the Tyrol reports will be driven to the same conclusion as Karl Kraus regarding Schalek's view of the war.

Once again, then, Schalek was damned as a war correspondent.

We have found in our study, however, that Schalek's contribution as a war correspondent was many-sided, and included such a level of honesty about the front line, together with criticism of the war, the governments of the warring powers, and the ways the war was being reported, that the military establishment saw fit to sack her.

In this respect Schalek occupies a very important place in the history of war reporting, and also among the annals of women war correspondents. She is the *only* officially accredited First World War journalist we know of (among all the warring nations) who wrote with that degree of honesty and still got her reports published in top, mainstream newspapers while the war was still raging. She was the only *female* journalist we know of who got that close to the actual shooting, and being shot at and shelled, over extended periods, with the express intention of writing about the conditions the troops were living and dying in. She is the only journalist we know of who wrote openly of her desire to convey the full horror of the trenches to her reading public *so that the war would be stopped*.

Certainly, there were patriotic, propagandist and jingoistic themes in her work. Certainly, she began her war journalism with a dominant emphasis on the glory of war. But she

⁶⁵⁸ Krasny, Elke/ Patka, Marcus/Rapp, Christian/Rapp-Wimberger, Nadia: *Von Samoa zum Isonzo. Die Fotografin und Reisejournalistin Alice Schalek*, Vienna 1999, Judisches Museum, Vienna.

⁶⁵⁹ Albrecht-Weinberger, 1999, p. 7.

changed and developed. She did not remain the cardboard caricature that Karl Kraus found it convenient to label her as.

We think the Austrian academic establishment needs to take a fresh look at her and seek to understand the full scope of her wartime reporting. We think her name needs to be redeemed in Austria today so that she can be appreciated for the positive, critical side of her war journalism. Indeed, Austrians might come to see that in her they have something in their past they can be proud of: a voice attempting persistently to make the public face up to the ugly realities of the front line. Wherever Karl Kraus has been studied, Alice Schalek's name has been denigrated. This has been unfair, not only to Alice Schalek, but also to Austria's history.

We also think there needs to be a more critical approach to the work of Karl Kraus. Too often in Austria, Kraus is seen as the pure, untainted voice of truth in a time of gross hypocrisy and deception. At a deeper level, many Austrians appear proud to be able to look back on such a figure, as if his life and work is the shining light that proves there was at least one prophet in their country who kept his hands entirely clean of the war's stains. In fact, the truth is more subtle. Things are not so black and white. Kraus, too, practised deception. His character assassination of Schalek in his play *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* was based on one-sided, selective readings of her work. If the country had not been traumatised and its institutions exhausted when the play was published, the 'Schalek' passages would have been howled down by critics and academia, and a properly functioning legal system might have seen Kraus sued for libel. Indeed, Kraus had a highly privileged position during the war.⁶⁶⁰ Having inherited a fortune he could print what he liked without concern for public opinion. He was on friendly terms with his censor, Dr. Kurt Hager, and was regarded by the War Surveillance Unit as a satirist whose work need not be taken seriously. His frequent trips to Switzerland during the war were noted by the authorities, but friends in high places managed to secure him official protection. His shrill 'prophetic' criticisms of the authorities and of his fellow journalists cost him nothing. Kraus had a freedom to criticise his government that was perhaps unmatched in Central and Eastern Europe. In Germany, the magazine of the Independent Socialists, *Freiheit*, remarked that if Kraus had been a German he would have been 'arrested long ago, driven away in an army truck, and never heard from again.'⁶⁶¹

After the war, when Nazism was on the rise, Kraus wrote not a word in criticism. He carefully avoided making any pronouncements that would put himself in danger. Kraus, who had always proclaimed himself the one true critic of injustice and hypocrisy, was strangely silent in the face of this most dangerous adversary. The Kraus-Schalek axis needs urgently to be reassessed.

A further reason Schalek's wartime journalism needs to be recognised afresh is because of its inherent descriptive richness. In 1977, as we have seen, Italians had her *Am Isonzo* (1916) book of articles translated into their mother tongue. While they seldom agree with her often biased moral judgement of Italians as unhygienic, tardy and frequently

⁶⁶⁰ Moulton, 2002, pp. 21 ff.

⁶⁶¹ Quoted in Moulton, 2002, p. 26.

cowardly, they value her detailed descriptions of everyday life at the front line amidst falling shells, rotting corpses and frayed nerves. The Slovenians, too, have followed this lead. Bearing in mind that Slovenians and Italians were the largest ethnic groups the Isonzo theatre of war affected, it is noteworthy that the book has found favour with the descendents of both sides' armies.

Reading her work from a British Commonwealth (R.G.) or an Austrian (C.M.) perspective brings us to the same conclusion: Schalek's work is too valuable to be left hidden away in the state archives. There are very few detailed, lengthy English or German journalistic accounts of life in the trenches written at the time of the actual battles. There is a growing number of collections of snippets of soldiers' letters, and these are of great value in telling us what it was like. Remarque's *All quiet on the western front* also gives a very vivid account, by one who was there, though it was written many years after the event, deliberately as a work of fiction, from the standpoint of a particular viewpoint that had been developed and honed in the years after the war. Schalek's accounts fit neither of these categories. She was not a soldier writing letters home, and she did not have the luxury of years of reflection before writing her impressions down. Her work is often raw and descriptive. To be sure, at times she reports uncritically what the commanding officers tell her. At times her actual observations are processed through the filter of a well worked out viewpoint. But even her viewpoints were in the process of development as her battlefield experiences unfolded. In short, her articles are valuable material and we can be enriched and informed if we read them with an open mind.

A further reason Schalek's work is valuable to the English speaking world is that we all need to understand this tragic war better. Today, in 2007, Europe is in many respects more like it was in 1914 than at any time between those two dates. Borders are relatively open, trade is booming, economies are market-based and growing, racial and nationalist issues continue to concern us. The big cities of Europe today have a similar feel to each other, as they did (though in some different respects) in 1914. The First World War did not have to happen. That burgeoning, prospering Europe did not have to be plunged into hell. Austria-Hungary did not have to make war on Serbia in order to increase its chances of survival. Germany did not have to offer such clear support to Austria-Hungary as it moved toward war. Britain, France and Russia could possibly have made greater diplomatic efforts to avert the catastrophe. But still the war happened. The current surge of publications of books about the First World War is a welcome sign that people today do want to understand what went wrong. Schalek's work can add some insights to that quest. For English readers it has the extra advantage that it speaks to us from the other side of the front line.

Schalek's wartime journalism also has a lot to offer women. From the days of her youth, Schalek pursued interests that were the usual preserve of men. She was one of the first woman mountaineers, unaccompanied global travellers, photojournalists, travel feature writers, and war correspondents. Her reports from the front line are some of the earliest we have from the perspective of a woman. Indeed, she was a woman who supported her country's war aims and might well have been an army officer if she had lived in an age where women are allowed to fight alongside men. She speaks with admiration of the

Montenegrin women who have taken up arms against her country, and with great respect for the women of Gorizia who chose to stay in the town and help keep its infrastructure going for the benefit of the troops, while it was being slowly blown to pieces by enemy shellfire. She was not a pacifist and did not place any value on criticising war for war's sake. But she had plenty to say about how she felt about everyday life in the firing line and about the development of that particular war. Women today who have any interest in military defence as a live option can learn a lot from her work.

Schalek also shows an attentiveness to minor details that could lead to further interesting studies. One of these is her fascination with supply troops – the porters who carry the supplies on foot, the last few kilometres from transport hubs to the troops in the trenches. These elderly, wizened, ragged, stooping, plodding souls won a place in her heart. Her hope was that a whole 'chapter' of military history would be devoted to them – not so much to the larger topic of the logistics of supply, but to the indefatigable work of these humble pedestrian porters.

Other themes she looks at in revealing detail include the daily routine in cramped hillside observation posts, everyday life among civilians in a battle zone, the daily life of troops in snowbound alpine front line positions, and the black humour of the trenches.

There remains a wider question as to how her work as a war correspondent can be assessed in terms of what is good or bad journalism. Schalek was by no means a pacifist, and her reporting was biased in that she was a loyal and patriotic citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But it is important to note that she did not become a war correspondent until after Italy had declared war on Austria-Hungary. Previous to this, Schalek's writings about the war effort contain little or no overt support for her country's war aims, and in places, as we have seen, there are expressions of regret. However, in her first article after Italy's declaration of war she is scathing of the Italians, berates them for being unwashed, and looks forward to their defeat. Why the change?

Italy's attempt to invade Austria-Hungary was widely perceived in the empire as an opportunistic act of unjustifiable aggression. While it was easier to doubt the legitimacy of Austria-Hungary's initial war aims in invading Serbia, this was much more clear-cut. Austria had done no harm to Italy, and had seen that country as at best a friend, at worst neutral. Austrians, in particular, felt justifiably threatened by the Italian armies massing on and pounding away at their border. Ironically, Britain's success in tempting Italy to invade Austria-Hungary also had the negative effect (from the Entente point of view) of giving Austria-Hungary genuine reason to fight harder. No matter how liberal one's views, it would be hard to be an Austrian at that time and not feel it was one's duty to resist the Italian invasion with every means available.

It is in this context that Schalek's war reporting needs to be seen, especially in her Tyrol and Isonzo assignments. She was biased, and fully aware of her bias. Does this make her reporting less valuable?

Do any war correspondents approach their work without bias? What is the proper balance between a correspondents' personal political views and the scenes she or he is reporting? What is the role of a war correspondent who genuinely feels the rightness of his or her own side's war aims? We hope this introduction to the work of Alice Schalek will contribute to this debate. Mostly, however, we hope it will lead to a new discussion about the place of this intrepid adventurer in Austrian and world history.

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