

The end of WWI – collapse of the Italian front

By Roger Morrell

Introduction

During WWI the Italian Front fluctuated in location, back and forth, except for the western end (Trentino) where it was remarkably static. After suffering huge casualties in the alpine fighting during 1916-1917, after the Battle of Caporetto in October 1917 the Italians found themselves pushed well south of the pre-WW1 border, and rather depleted in men and arms. The Austrian side, supported by the Germans, however, outran their supply lines, and had to retreat somewhat to regroup. Around this time the British and French started to reinforce the Italian effort, both with troops and with war matériel. The balance in favour of the Italians turned when the Germans redeployed their support to the Western Front ready for the upcoming spring 1918 offensive, which left the Austrians on their own to decide how to win the war on this front. A two-pronged attack was planned in June 1918, but was immediately repulsed by the Italians at the Second Battle of Piave. The sequence of events left a large number of unsupported Austrian troops on the west bank of the swollen Piave River and no means of retreat with the bridges destroyed by the Austrian artillery barrage. An estimated 20,000 drowned trying to cross the river.

However, the Italians were in no position to take the advantage and press home a decisive attack because Piave River was recognised as presenting the same problem to the Italians as it did to the Austrians – the lack of support lines once crossed. The advantage only came after consolidation of Italian and Allied forces from the Western Front.

By October 1918, Italy finally had enough soldiers to mount an offensive, by which time Austria-Hungary was falling apart. Czechoslovakia, Croatia, and Slovenia were proclaiming their independence and troops started deserting, disobeying orders and retreating. The Italian attack targeted Vittorio Veneto, across the Piave River (Fig. 1). The Italian Army broke through a gap near Sacile and poured in reinforcements that crushed the Austrian defensive line. On 3 November, 300,000 Austrian soldiers surrendered, and an Armistice was agreed which was signed in the Villa Giusti, near Padua, on 3 November, taking effect at 3 pm on 4 November. Also on 3 November, the Italian Navy took control of Trieste. By the end of hostilities, Italy had seized control of the entire portion of Dalmatia that had been guaranteed to it by the secret 1915 Treaty of London. From 5–6 November 1918, Italian forces were reported to have reached Lissa, Lagosta, Sebenico, and other towns on the Dalmatian coast. Admiral Enrico Millo declared himself Italy's 'Governor of Dalmatia'.

The Italian army also marched north uncontested into the North Tirol (accompanied by some British forces [2], and occupied Innsbruck for a period. The former Austrian provinces of Südtirol (Trentino-Alto Adige), Friaul-Julisch Venetien (Fruili-Venezia-Giulia), the whole of Istria, and parts of the Dalmatian coast and islands as far south as Lissa/Viš became part of the expanded Italy. However, tensions with the new Yugoslavia resulted in the 1920 Treaty of Rapallo, which made some adjustments to Italy's Dalmatian holding, limiting it to the Zara enclave, the island of Arbe/Rab and a few other islands. Eventually, the former Hungarian seaport of Fiume and nearby Sušak were formally ceded to Italy by the 1924 Treaty of Rome.

Official philatelic goings-on

In addition to the Italian military post system being extended into the occupied zone (e.g. Fig. 2), the immediate impact of the Italian occupation was, of course a degree of chaos in the civilian postal service. For one thing, the currency in the occupied areas was different to normal Italian *centisimi* and *lira*. To mark the occupation, the Austrian stamps and postal stationery available at post offices were gathered up and overprinted in three lines: 'Regno d'Italia / Trentino / 3 nov.18 /' (appearing on 11 November 1918, Fig. 3), or the error-prone 'Regno d'Italia / 3.XI.18 / Venezia-Giulia' (14 November 1918, Fig.4).

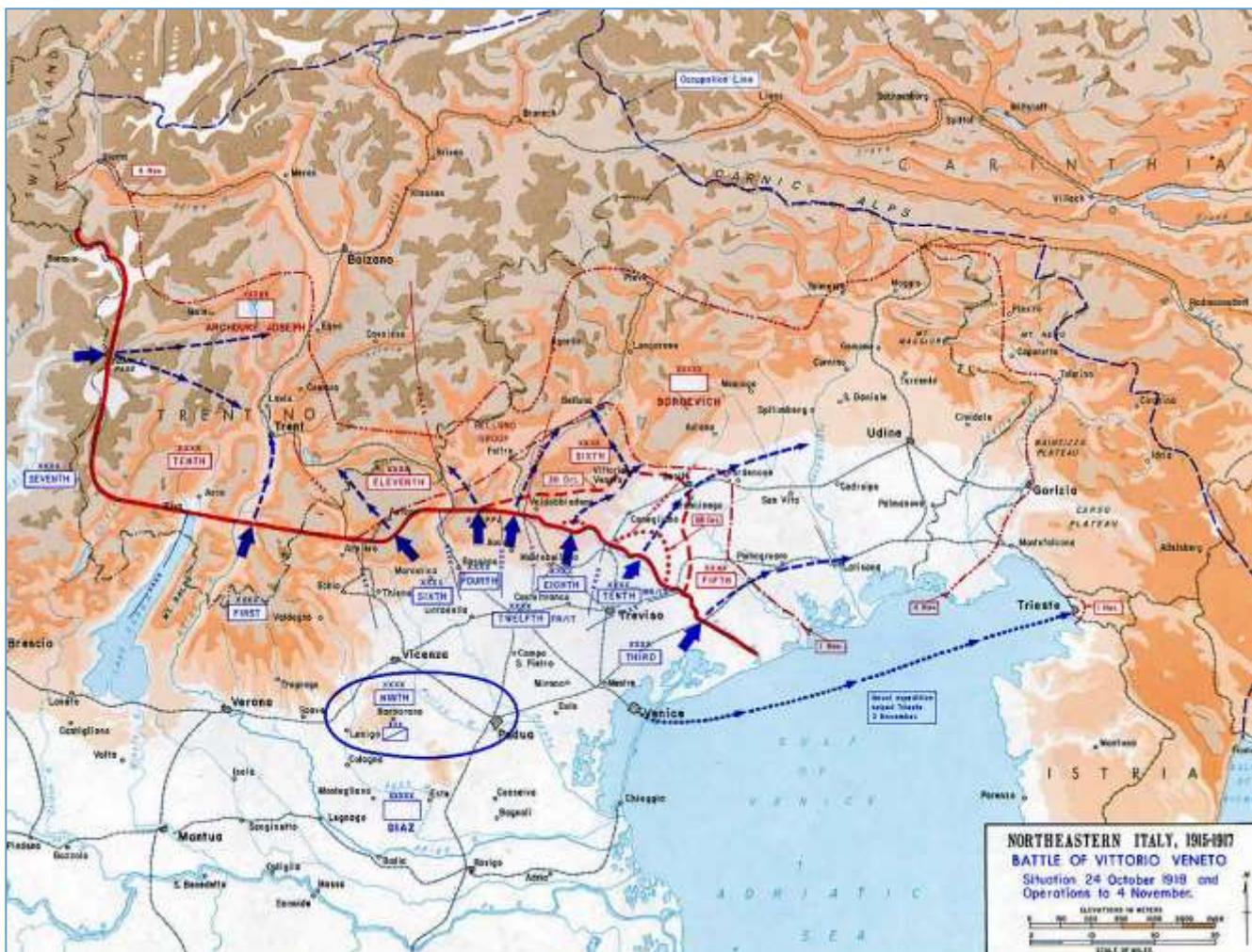


Fig 1: Battle of Vittorio Veneto, 24 October – 3 November 1918 (see Ref 1)



Fig 2: Letter sent from 'Meran bei Bozen' to Switzerland via the Italian military postal system with Italian stamps and Posta Militare 90 datestamps of 13 March 1919, opened and censored in Milan.



These issues saw some non-philatelic use, but despite the straitened times philatelists were soon on the scene, and much mail is philatelic (Fig. 5). The 10h postal stationery card was similarly treated (Fig. 6), but in a different font.

Fig. 3: Trentino overprints on Austrian stamps – guarantees required! (only 11 copies of the 10k are known).



Fig. 4: (a, b) Venezia Giulia sheet overprint on Austrian stamps; (c) the hand overprint on only 37 of the 10 k value; examples of errors: (d) missing dot after '18', (e) missing '3. XI', (f) serifed 'X' and weak 'I'.



Fig. 5: Venezia Giulia overprint stamps used in Trieste on 20 November 1918 on a registered letter to Bâle/Basel. Censored in Bologna.



Fig. 6: Overprinted Austrian postal stationery using a different typeface to that for the stamps (although similar to that on the 10k value), and an example used in Dignano on 20 December 1918 and sent to Genova (Genoa), censored in Trieste.

These Austrian stamps were quickly replaced on 20 December 1918 by a series of nine Italian stamps overprinted 'Venezia Tridentina' (Italian currency implied, for use in Trentino, Fig. 7a) added to which were three further stamps surcharged in Austrian currency, *centisimi di corona*, issued on 1 February 1919 (SG says January), Fig. 7b. {Tridentina' as the province name comes from the name of the Roman town Tridentum (now Trento), a convenient stop on the Roman Road north to Innsbruck. It was named thus in honour of the god Neptune, usually depicted with a trident.] There was a similar series overprinted 'Venezia Giulia' (Italian currency implied, Fig. 8a) issued on 6 December 1918, and two further stamps additionally surcharged in *centisimi* on 20 February 1919 (Fig. 8b). Postage due stamps were also overprinted for Venezia Giulia. From January 1919 onwards these issues were replaced by a unified issue of Italian stamps (postage, express and postage due) surcharged only in Austrian currency (*centisimi di corona* and *corona*, Fig. 9). In Italian occupied Dalmatia, the Trentino and Venezia Giulia *corona* overprints were used until they were replaced in February 1921 by similar stamps but with the overprint in a sans-serif typeface, rather than serifed (Fig. 10). The exception was the 1 *lire* stamp, which used an '*una corona*' overprint from 1 May 1919, rather than the '1 *corona*' overprint used in Trentino and Venezia Giulia. Italian postal stationery was similarly treated in Venezia Giulia (Fig. 11). Some examples of covers and cards are given in Figs. 12-15.



(a)



(b)

Fig. 7: Venezia Tridentina overprint on Italian stamps.



(a)



Fig. 8: Venezia Giulia overprint on Italian stamps



(b)



Fig. 9: General issue in Austrian currency only



Fig. 10: Dalmatian coast issues in Austrian currency only, using spelled out 'una corona' on the initial issue, and san-serif font on the later issues.



Fig. 11: Italian 10 centesimi postal stationery card with overprints (a) 'Venezia Giulia' in serifed font with 3 November date, (b) 'Venezia Giulia' in block font, (c) 'Venezia Giulia' with Austrian currency added, (d) general issue in bold font, and (e) a variety in a weaker, uneven font.



Fig. 12: (left) Letter mailed on 3 February 1919 from Meran/Merano to Amsterdam franked with mixed Italian overprint issues. Censored in Bologna.



Fig. 13: (below) Insured letter mailed from Trieste Centro to 'Lucerna'/Luzern, Switzerland on 14 March 1919, franked with 65h in general issue Austrian currency stamps. Censored in Trieste and Bologna.



Fig. 14: Austrian currency overprinted Italian postal stationery card sent registered from Trieste Centro to Lucerne, Switzerland on 13 March 1919. Censored in Milan. Austrian registration label.



Fig. 15: Italian postal stationery card overprinted with Austrian currency used from (Sveti) Filip Jakov (south of Zara/Zadar) on 1 November 1919 to Menzingen, Switzerland. Censored in Zara.

An example from the short period of Italian rule before the 1920 Treaty of Rapallo gave the town to Yugoslavia.

Messing about with postage due

Fun and games with postage due stamps ensued in Trentino province. Apparently with official agreement, two post offices in Bozen/Bolzano (1 and 3) and also in a number of small offices including Algund, Naturns, Partschins, Tisens, Tscherms, Dorf Tirol/Tirolo and Lana (all near Meran/Merano), overcame a shortage of the overprinted Italian stamps to variously place handstamped 'T' or 'T in a circle' or 'T value' (Bozen 1), '(Value) / PORTO / S.T.' (S.T. = Segnatassa) (Bozen 3), 'TAXE' (Bozen), or 'Nachzahlung / Heller' (Dorf Tirol/Tirolo) on Austrian or Italian postage stamps. Some of these are represented in the Michel Austria Specialised catalogue, but for a full listing the reader is referred to the Sassone specialised catalogue [3]. Some of the higher values were probably made for collectors, and never saw formal use. A selection of stamps is shown in Figs. 16-18.





Fig. 18: Unfranked letter posted in Kardaun / Cardano (east of Bozen) on 6 April 1919 to Bozen, and 'decorated' with 40 heller-worth of provisional postage due stamps (correct double deficiency) all postmarked Bozen 3 on the same day.

The Meran/Merano local issue

The business community in the upper part of the Adige valley, the Vinschgau above Meran/Merano (Fig. 19), decided that in the immediate aftermath of the Armistice when the postal services temporarily collapsed, a local service would be introduced to maintain communication, for which permission was granted by the occupying Italian military authorities. On 25 November 1918, a series of three stamps 2h, 5h, and 10h bearing a numeral and a rectangular border of Gothic script reading *Hilfspost des Handelsgremium des Kurbezirk Meran* (Emergency post of the Business Committee of the Spa Region Meran) and the date '1918' was issued for use as a surcharge to be used in addition to the normal postal rate on, respectively, newspapers, postcards and letters travelling along the Adige valley, in order to fund a courier system (Fig. 20). On 30 November 1918, the design was changed (Figs. 21, 22). The value in the centre was replaced by the Meran/Merano coat of arms, the text round the border became *Gremium der Kaufmannschaft des Kurbezirk Meran*, and the value was written across the bottom in place of '1918'. These stamps were printed in Meran by the Pleticha book printing company in sheetlets of 9, 10 or 12 on coloured paper, with curious uneven *tête-bêche* positioning (Fig. 23). The first issue was on gummed shiny paper, the second on plain paper not gummed. According to the Michel catalogue, postmarks are known from Algund/Lagundo, Partschins/Parcines, Naturns/Naturno, Schlanders/Silandro, Mals/Males Venosta and Töll/Tel, although there may be others (e.g. Glurns/Glorenza, Fig. 21b). This service finished on 15 December 1918 when normal post was restored. Numbers of stamps printed are in the low hundreds, with some particularly scarce paper colour varieties, and properly mailed items are sought after. Forgeries are known (e.g. Fig. 24), and are recognisable by their consistent appearance, with more uniform alignment of the border bars, which are in short lengths. In the examples shown, the crescent-shaped marks to the lower left and upper right of the shield are missing.

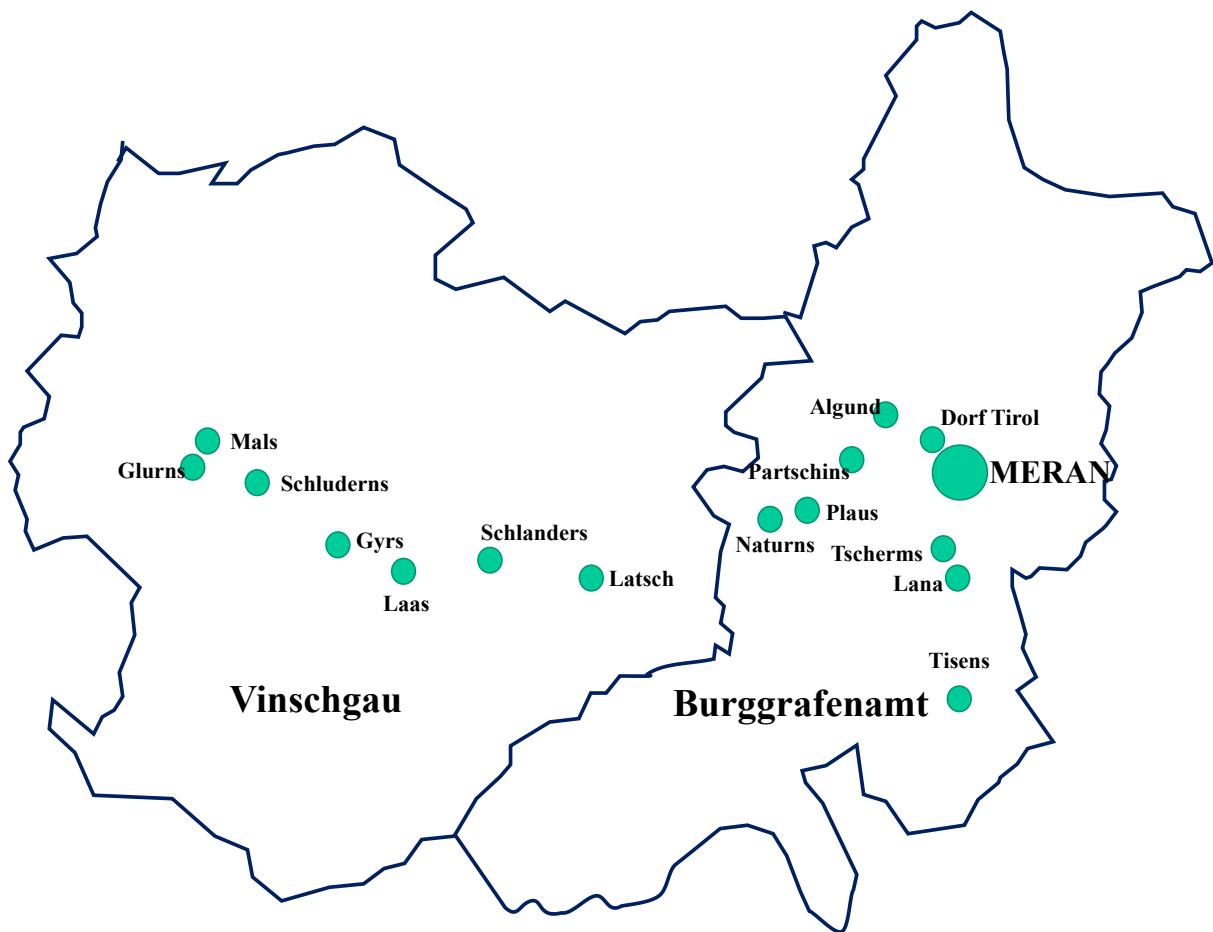


Fig. 19: Sketch map of Meran and the upper Adige valley, with villages named.



Fig. 20: First Merano local issue. At left: 5h unused on matt paper and 10h unused on shiny paper. Below: 2h correctly used on a newspaper forwarded from Meran to Naturns, and likewise, from Algund to Schlanders, Vinschgau [4].

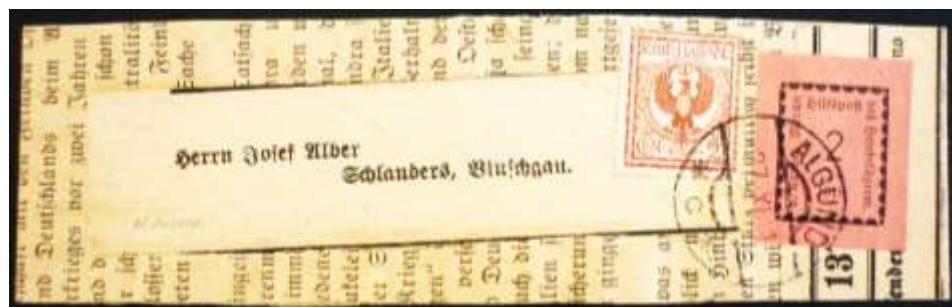


Fig. 21: Second Merano local issue (a) all three values (shown at 100%) used philatelically in Schlanders on 7 December 1918, (b, c) paper shades of the 10h value (shown at 150%).



Fig. 22: Second Merano issue 5h correctly used on a local letter from Naturns to Schlanders. The large oval cachet, also seen in Figures 20a, 20b and 21a, is of the *Kaufmannschaft*.

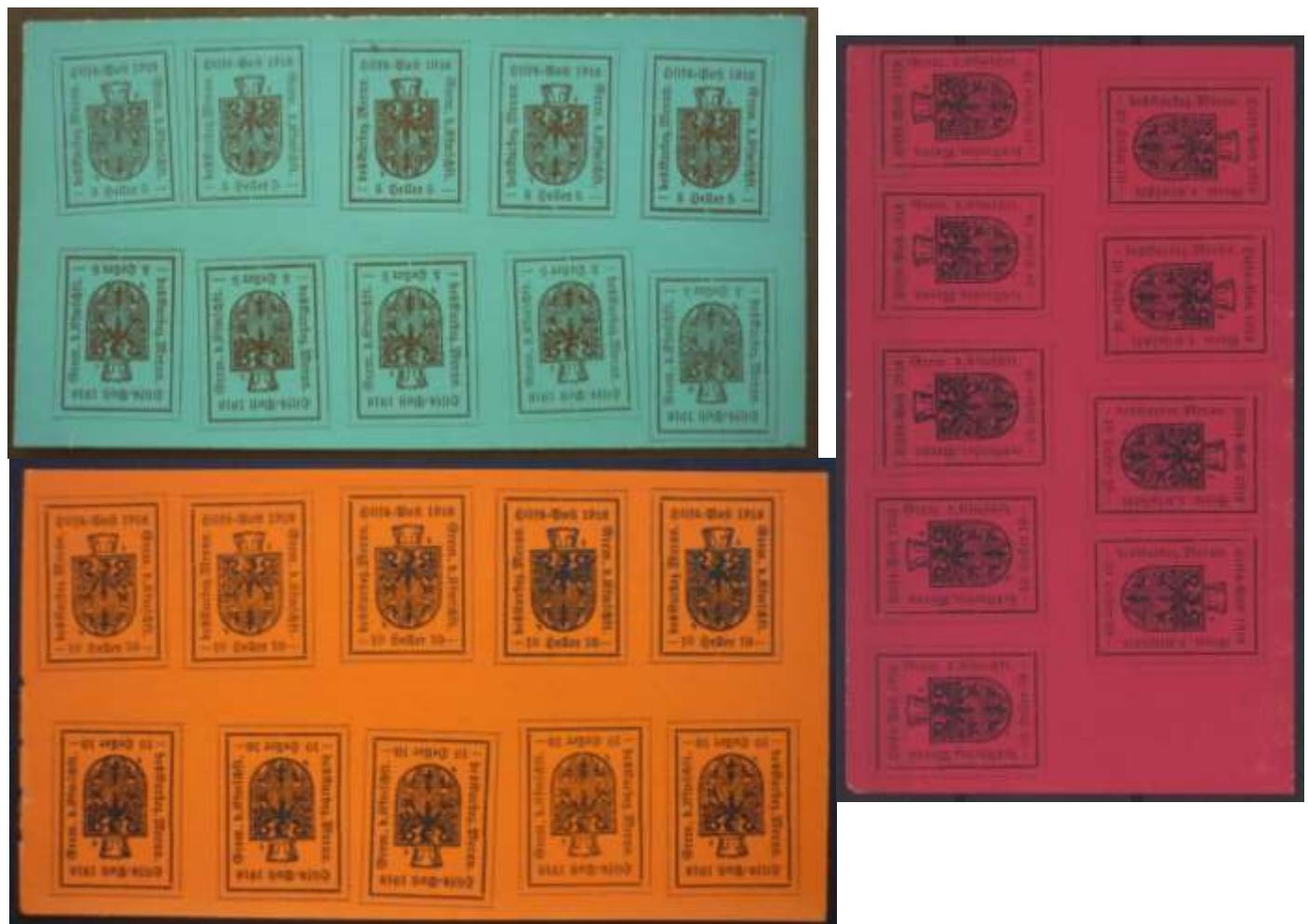


Fig. 23: Example sheetlet layouts of the second Merano issue, 5h, 10h on purple paper, and 10h on orange paper.



Fig 24: Forgeries of the Merano issue. All the stamps in the sheetlet have the same frame line gap at the upper left (which varies considerably in the originals, red arrow), and are missing the two crescent moon features to the lower left and upper right of the shield (positions marked with white arrows).

Conclusions

While the average collector can never hope to ‘complete’ his collection of this material (a glance at the catalogue will confirm), this is a fascinating short period of takeover by the Italian authorities. The Treaty of St Germain confirmed the transfer of the Südtirol, Friul-Julisch Venetien, the Istrian peninsula, a strip of the Dalmatian coast and some of the islands to Italy. Italy also had a strong hand in Albania. Eventually Italy also annexed the former Hungarian seaport of Fiume. However, as a consequence of WWII, it lost most of the Istrian peninsula (except Trieste), Fiume and the rest of its Dalmatian coast towns and islands to an enlarged Yugoslavia, but retained the alpine areas. Nevertheless, even a century later when one tours the Südtirol one still finds a very distinct Austrian flavour. I even saw models of Franz Josef and Sissi in a souvenir shop!

References

- [1] http://www.emersonkent.com/map_archive/battle_of_vittorio_veneto.htm (Figure 1)
- [2] See: Taylor, A. ‘British troops in the Tirol’, 1918-1919’, Austria 195.
- [3] Sassone ‘Catalogo Spezializzato dei Francobolli d’Italia e dei Paesi Italiani’, Vol. 1, Sassone S.r.l., Milano, Italy
- [4] <http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/contributions/16581#prettyPhoto> (Figure 20e)