


10,000 Soldiers Die in Tyrol From Avalanches During World War I

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During World War I, a battle waged between Austro-Hungarian and Italian soldiers amidst the cold, snowy, mountainous region of South Tyrol. While freezing cold and enemy fire were obviously dangerous, even more deadly were the heavily snow-padded peaks that surrounded the troops. Avalanches brought tons of snow and rock down these mountains, killing at an estimated 10,000 Austro-Hungarian and Italian soldiers in December 1916.

Italy Enters World War I

When World War I began after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914, countries across Europe stood by their allegiances and declared war to support their own allies. Italy, on the other hand, did not.

According to the Triple Alliance, first formed in 1882, Italy, Germany, and Austro-Hungary were allies. However, the terms of the Triple Alliance were specific enough to allow Italy, who had neither a strong military nor a powerful navy, to shirk their alliance by finding a way to remain neutral at the beginning of World War I.

As the fighting continued into 1915, the Allied Forces (specifically Russia and Great Britain) began to woo the Italians into joining their side in the war. The lure for Italy was the promise of Austro-Hungarian lands, specifically a contested, Italian-speaking area in Tyrol, located in south-western Austro-Hungary.

After more than two months of negotiations, the Allied promises were finally enough to bring Italy into World War I. Italy declared war on Austro-Hungary on May 23, 1915.

Getting the Higher Position

With this new declaration of war, Italy sent troops north to attack Austro-Hungary, while Austro-Hungary sent troops to the southwest to defend itself. The border between these two countries was located in the mountain ranges

of the Alps, where these soldiers fought for the next two years.

In all military struggles, the side with the higher ground has the advantage. Knowing this, each side tried to climb higher into the mountains. Dragging heavy equipment and weaponry with them, soldiers climbed as high as they could and then dug in.

Tunnels and trenches were dug and blasted into the mountainsides, while barracks and forts were built to help protect the soldiers from the freezing cold.

Deadly Avalanches

While contact with the enemy was obviously dangerous, so were the frigid living conditions. The area, regularly icy, was particularly so from the unusually heavy snowstorms of the 1915-1916 winter, which left some areas covered in 40 feet of snow.

In December 1916, the explosions from tunnel-building and from fighting took its toll for the snow began to fall off the mountains in avalanches.

On December 13, 1916, a particularly powerful avalanche brought an estimated 200,000 tons of ice and rock on top of an Austrian barracks near Mount Marmolada. While 200 soldiers were able to be rescued, another 300 were killed.

In the following days, more avalanches fell on troops -- both Austrian and Italian. The avalanches were so severe that an estimated 10,000 troops were killed by avalanche during December 1916.

After the War

These 10,000 deaths by avalanche did not end the war. Fighting continued into 1918, with a total of 12 battles fought in this frozen battlefield, most near the Isonzo River.

When the war did end, the remaining, cold troops left the mountains for their homes, leaving much of their equipment behind.