

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The disputed lake: Lake Garda between tourism and nationalism on the eve of the Great War

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### Abstract

This article reconstructs the heated – local and national – debate around the consistent and pervasive foreign presence in the border territory of Lake Garda on the eve of the Great War. Here, the growing nationalistic tensions that preceded the conflict intertwined with the emerging hospitality industry. Tourism, seen as a social phenomenon, can thus offer a privileged perspective on the transformations of the general context of the time. Introduced by Austro-Germanic inhabitants of the lake at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the hospitality industry on Lake Garda flourished up to the eve of the Great War. There were, however, also opponents to this model of development. The dispute escalated to the point that, in the perception of the locals, the ‘outsiders’ turned into ‘enemies’ and Lake Garda increasingly became a disputed area: a symbol of the tensions of the time.

**Keywords:** tourism; nationalism; Lake Garda; Great War; hospitality industry

### Introduction

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the so-called ‘movement of foreigners’ emerged in Italy. An increase in economic well-being and the development of rail and road communications increased the international character of this tourist phenomenon. The European aristocracies and, above all, the bourgeoisie that arose in Continental Europe after the Second Industrial Revolution created a widespread demand for travel, healthy environments and escapism. Italy’s historical attraction for foreigners, which can be traced to the era of the Grand Tour, favoured the arrival of large flows of tourists who crowded the most renowned destinations: thermal resorts, mountains, the Mediterranean coast and the lakes. Initially, holidaymaking was conceived as a source of well-being, a therapeutic practice and a natural remedy for illness. Subsequently, the health issue diminished as the therapeutic motivations gave way to the dimension of *loisir* that was at the basis of the urban transformation of spaces (Battilani 2009, 93–145; Berrino 2011, 59–146; Carera 2002, 21–40; Scatamacchia 1999; Belli 2015, 15–31).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a flourishing ‘hospitality industry’ with different priorities and characteristics established itself on Lake Garda, also known as the

'Benaco'. In the years before the Great War, the northern part of the lake (now in the Trentino region) fell within the political borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In those years, its proximity to the Mitteleuropean world favoured an exceptional moment of fame thanks to the development of a series of tourist 'health' resorts: the *Kurort* towns of Arco and Riva, at the north of the lake; Gardone Riviera in the south, where a garden city was created; and Salò, in Italian territory. The lake's shores were crowded with an aristocratic and upper-class clientele, enjoying winters that were known for their mild and temperate climate, and hosted a melting pot of different nationalities, languages and cultures. This was Lake Garda's belle époque. The extraordinary rise in such heterogeneous tourist flows generated prosperity and well-being but it also introduced rapid, profound and disruptive transformations in the territory's daily life, administration and politics. The growing presence of foreigners aroused hostility in sections of society; as a result, the perception of the foreigner changed, as they were now considered an 'enemy'. Nonetheless, advocates and opponents had a common objective: to attract more Italian holidaymakers to Lake Garda by improving services, advertising and accessibility. The foreign tourists, in turn, also changed their attitudes. Gathered in real enclaves on Italian territory, they were often snobbish if not hostile towards the Italians, despite the intervention of mediators. Tensions even shifted from land to water, as disagreements and differences involved Garda's navigation system.

With the outbreak of the war, the foreigners turned into enemies and left Garda. Their enormous properties were confiscated, resold at auction and mainly bought by Italian entrepreneurs. A new season of Garda tourism thus opened, as well as a new page in Italian history. In the words of the poet-soldier Gabriele d'Annunzio, citizen of the Vittoriale di Gardone Riviera since 1923, the process of '*stodeschizzazione*' (the removal of Germans and Austrians) came to completion (Antongini 1938; Schlude 2008, 7–32; Isnenghi 2008; Gatta 2021, 41–42).

Drawing on archival sources and newspaper articles, this article examines the confrontation that developed, in the years preceding the Great War, on Lake Garda, where the growing nationalistic drive – widespread also in the rest of the country – intertwined with the emerging tourist industry. Seen as a social phenomenon, tourism thus offers a privileged perspective on the profound transformations of the prewar period. The heated debate about the 'intrusive' presence of German and Austrian tourists shifted from the local to the national level, turning Garda into a 'disputed lake' – a symbol of the tensions of the time. These tensions eventually led to the war that radically changed tourist practices not only on Lake Garda but also along the Mediterranean coast, as the summer season became the preferred period for holidays and holidaymaking. It was precisely the transalpine tourists who would mark this transformation by inaugurating new seasons of lake tourism. The article focuses on the social, economic and political aspects of this turning point, which changed the history of tourism in this area for good.

### The birth of tourism on Lake Garda: from *Kurort* to garden city

After the handover of the Veneto region to Italy in 1866, the Alto Garda Trentino remained the only riviera of the Habsburg Empire. This circumstance enhanced Benaco's fame among the Mitteleuropean elite, while new concepts linked to naturalistic medicine and the search for therapeutic places with sun and healthy air – following the dictates of German *Naturphilosophie* – were gaining ground (Tonelli 1995, 34–40; Taiani 1996, 127–140). The northern town of Arco, in Austrian territory, had been the site of a meteorological station ever since 1855 (Larcher 1979), and it distinguished itself for its salubrious climate and the rapid construction of services dedicated to patient-holidaymakers. In a short period of time, a new town (*Kurort*) physically separated from the

historic town (*Stadt*) was created from scratch. Tourists arrived in such large numbers that, in the winter, Arco was ‘nearly transformed into a metropolis’ (Grazioli 2001, 161). The spaces reserved for the exclusive ritual of elite tourism were designed separately from the pre-existing town, in relation also to the more sanitary nature of the visit. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the hospitality industry also improved considerably in Riva del Garda (Berrino 2011, 193; Battilani 2009, 323–334; Grazioli 1993; Orandini 1980; Leonardi 1996, 2007, 2010; Turrini 2004; Simoni 1992; Tonelli 1995, 137–138; D’Agostino and Cunaccia 2015). Subsequently visited even by the likes of Kafka and the Mann brothers (Grazioli 2000; Turrini 2004, 73–90), Riva del Garda witnessed a rapid increase in accommodation services and entertainment options for tourists.

In the 1872–3 season, Arco received 226 guests; the number rose to 331 two years later, 708 in 1880 and 1881, 1,682 in 1890 and 2,654 at the end of the century. Over ten thousand foreign tourists visited Riva del Garda in 1901, with a constant increase in the following years. The overall number of inhabitants of the town of Riva was thus greatly augmented: in 1910, it counted 4,106 residents – 8,131 if we add the inhabitants of peripheral areas. In 1906, there were 37,600 guests, in a crescendo that would be interrupted only by the Great War; by then, the number of visitors had reached 50,000 (Marri Tonelli 1989).

In February 1885, Ludwig Rohden, a German doctor from Westphalia who had opened a health clinic for tuberculosis patients in Arco, went in search of a new place to elaborate his theories. Rhoden crossed the border and ‘discovered’ Gardone together with a German colleague, Carl Königer. He wrote a detailed article on the merits of the town’s location, the first in a series of – scientific and later tourist – publications that gained Gardone worldwide fame (Rohden 1885; Königer 1907; Mazza 1997, 161–183). Two years earlier, Luigi Wimmer – an Austrian engineer immersed in Italian culture – had opened a modest hotel in Gardone. When Wimmer died prematurely in 1885, his wife Emilia turned it into the Grand Hotel Gardone, under the guidance of the engineer Angelo Fuchs. In addition to this structure, several other large hotels sprang up in those years, as had happened in Trentino – from the Grand Hotel Savoy to the Grand Hotel Fasano and the Grand Hotel in Salò (Aresi 2016).

Linked to the rapid development of the hospitality industry, Gardone’s new identity thus recalled that of Arco. Doctors played a very important role, while the presence of prominent figures in society earned the town fame and gave it appeal. Gardone was converted into a garden city thanks to the creation of parks and public spaces for entertainment and strolling and the introduction of species of plants and flowers that were typical of the Mediterranean coast, hitherto unseen on the riviera. Architects and garden experts – mostly Austrians, Germans and Swiss (including Fritz Zawar, Heinrich Schäfer and Wilhelm Halm) – designed sumptuous residences, villas and chalets, reflecting the Nordic taste of Mitteleuropean inspiration that would later arouse much indignation (Ferro 2008; Mazza 1997, 2005; Monicelli 1995; Terraroli 2017; Treccani 2001).

These were the years of ‘sanitary engineering’, an urban planning trend aimed at designing new urban settlements according to standards of utmost cleanliness. The question of hygiene was also at the centre of Italian political debate: numerous inquiries into issues of social hygiene took place from 1861 to 1896. The greatest diffusion of ideas about hygiene occurred during the 20 years between 1870 and 1890, when the efforts of a group of doctors put in charge of public health came to fruition and the hygienist doctor Luigi Pagliani drafted Crispi’s sanitary code (Giovannini 1996). The code contained the essential principles of sanitary government. The law on the protection of hygiene and public health (*Tutela dell’igiene e della sanità pubblica*) stipulated that each municipality should protect the health of its inhabitants by adopting specific regulations and providing indications on water mains, a sewerage system, cleanliness and habitability. This set of new orientations stimulated, in Gardone Riviera as elsewhere in the country, important interventions aimed at transforming the town’s general layout in order to meet the needs of health,

decorum and embellishment as required by the presence of tourists (Pagliani 1902; Pedrini 1905; Belli 2015).

At the same time, the hospitality industry was becoming a driving force for the Italian economy, giving rise to a local entrepreneurial class that operated and invested in the sector (Mocarelli and Tedeschi 2017, 47–54). This did not mean, though, that there was no dissent. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for many years, Gardone Riviera was governed by administrators not originally from the town but with an Italian cultural background – mostly people with an interest in tourism. Luigi Wimmer, for example, joined a municipal commission in 1877 and was town councillor and mayor from 1881 to 1883, whereas Angelo Fuchs – the designer of the Grand Hotel Gardone and the greatest proponent of the Mitteleuropean development of Gardone – was a councillor, council member and mayor from 1910 to 1920, the year of his death.<sup>1</sup>

Within the administration, there was no lack of resistance to the town's rapid tourist development. As early as 1903, Agostino Celli – a municipal councillor for Morgnaga, a hamlet in the hills surrounding Gardone – repeatedly expressed impatience with 'the insidious penetration of the Austro-Germans into the Benaco–Brescia region' (Mazza 1997, 103).<sup>2</sup> His stance culminated in a fierce intervention in the columns of the pro-Italian magazine *L'Eco del Baldo*, printed in Riva, in which Celli described the hospitality industry as a 'system of provocative arrogance and absolutism' (Mazza 1997, 105).

In 1911, during Fuchs's term of office, the municipal water mains for all the hamlets of Gardone were completed. At the end of the works, some inhabitants of Gardone had a plaque erected in Largo Landi as a tribute to the previous mayor and native of the village, Giuseppe Foresti, to whom they attributed the merit of creating this service. This demonstrates that the integration between the two (local and foreign) communities was by no means completed (Mazza 1997, 88).

### From strangers to enemies

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the climate of Lake Garda and its immediate hinterland became an important attractive element. The tourist's perception of the territory moved from that of a 'means of production' to a 'product of consumption' (Aresi 2016, 168). The demand for space and services linked to health tourism triggered a transformation of the social and the urban economic structure of the places in which it took root. The first observers of this phenomenon gave a decidedly positive assessment of the change, as this description of Gardone by Giuseppe Solitro, a professor from Split who had relocated to Lake Garda, demonstrates:

In only a few years' time, Gardone changed completely: roads, promenades on the flat and on the hillside, shops, a telegraph, post office, boat services, steamboat stops [and] all that could make a long stay in a place comfortable and pleasant for the holidaymaker – everything was added little by little. A new life now swirls around the small town, which can truly compete with the most famous Italian and foreign thermal resorts ... As a consequence of this new life and to maintain and increase it, thermal resort committees were set up in Arco, Riva, Gardone Riviera and Salò with the aim of cooperating – together with the municipalities, hoteliers and private individuals – to improve the tourists' visit, maintain and increase public comforts, and provide tourists with the information and clarification that they might require (Solitro 1897, 753–755).

It was precisely in Gardone that, after only a few years, a German-speaking community emerged. Living in villas, luxurious flats and hotels, it had its own meeting places, cafés and casinos, a Protestant church and even a newspaper written almost entirely in

German, *Der Bote von Gardasee*. For years, ‘this village within a village’ – which generally became more lively during the winter period, as also happened on the shores of the Mediterranean (Berrino 2011, 203; Boyer 2005, 303) – was given a warm welcome. The newcomers bought land at a good price to build new dwellings, thus bringing money and wealth into the community.

However, in the early twentieth century, hostility towards foreigners began to grow, especially on the Italian side. Their presence, in fact, became more numerous and ‘invasive’ (Mazza 1997, 102–111). In Gardone Riviera, the *Kurverein* (the health resort committee) published its first *Fremdliste* in the 1887–8 season, when it recorded 406 guests; the number rose to 8,000 in the 1906–7 season. A guide by Königer also reported the number of guests in Gardone: 406 in 1887; 1,380 in 1892–3; 4,575 in 1900–1; 8,000 in 1906–7. They initially came from northern Germany but were soon followed by Austrian, southern German, Russian, Danish, Dutch and English tourists (Königer 1907, 165–166).

In the 1906–7 season, the number of guests on the western riviera rose to 8,000 of a total of 166,000 in Garda as a whole, of which 63 per cent were in Gardone Riviera, 20 per cent in Salò, 16 per cent in Maderno and one per cent in Gargnano. In 1909, the list of foreigners in the *Kurverein* hotels on the riviera in the Brescia province reported over ten thousand guests, of whom only one per cent were Italian (Mazza 2005, 189–205). This is a lot if we consider that the most important town, Gardone Riviera, counted 1,500 inhabitants in 1881; the number rose to 1,700 in 1901 and 2,200 in 1911. In those years, Gardone’s appeal was greater than that of all the other localities; by 1901, it had as many as 30 public establishments, including hotels, boarding houses, trattorias and pubs.<sup>3</sup> In the years between 1908 and 1913, foreign guests on the riviera rose from 8,380 to 12,636. In 1910, Gardone alone received 10,000 guests (Simoni 2001b, 321).

As the number of guests grew, so did an anti-German movement, which took concrete form in 1909, when the Federation for the defence of the *italianità* of Lake Garda was established in Verona. It consisted of institutional players, like the provincial administrations of Brescia, Mantua and Verona, and numerous municipalities. Several associations also took sides in favour of the lake’s Italian character, first and foremost the Dante Alighieri Society: focusing on the defence of the Italian language (including in tourist posters), it advocated patriotic values using propagandistic tones and methods.

The impetuous growth of the hospitality industry – supported mainly by foreign capital – and the profound economic as well as urban transformations dictated by the advent of tourism in an area with a purely agricultural economy created uncertainty and inequalities. Rapid changes in the identity of places culminated in the generation of serious social friction. Enhanced by the proximity and contention of space, nationalistic identity dynamics were reinforced in Italian territory, in particular (Gentile 2021; Ventrone 2004; Debarbieux, Staszak and Tebbaa 2012).

The clash next moved to newspaper columns, but also expressed itself in spectacular propaganda events, like the trip to Lake Garda, on Sunday 12 April 1908, of some three hundred members of the Dante Alighieri Society, which was very active in those years both in Italy and abroad (De Nardis 2014). The press devoted ample space to this initiative.<sup>4</sup> The programme of this busy day included processions, visits to various towns and a cruise on the lake. An ostentatious performance highlighted the *italianità* of Lake Garda and the need to increase ‘Italian’ tourism on the Benaco. Invitations to support the events were directed at ‘all the municipalities of the Riviera’ and ‘especially Gardone, where the need for a manifestation of *Italianità* is most keenly felt’.<sup>5</sup>

Italians hardly know this region and turn their pilgrimages and admiration to more celebrated, but certainly less beautiful, towns. The Germans, instead, who know a lot more about it than we do, arrive in droves to fully enjoy the lake’s merry blue colour,

to bask in this warmish air; little by little, as a result of this peaceful invasion, the shores of Lake Garda are being populated with hotels, obviously very elegant but bearing a foreign imprint, from the emblem on the façade to the stern face of the last waiter.<sup>6</sup>

The following year, a new event – again promoted by the Dante Alighieri Society – brought ‘many young people from all parts of Italy, students from high schools in Milan and from the Bocconi commercial university’ to Lake Garda, where they walked along the Riviera,

from Gardone to Fasano to see the conditions of its development, and before leaving they promised to return in November but not alone, accompanying all the students from Milan, returning by the hundred to go as far as Riva, crossing the border and bringing the warm, affectionate greetings of Italian youth to the land of Trentino.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘*stodeschizzazione*’ of Lake Garda gained national attention with the controversy that followed the publication of some articles by the journalist Giulio De Frenzi (pseudonym of Luigi Federzoni) in the *Giornale d'Italia*. In the account of his trip around the lake, Federzoni provocatively emphasised certain aspects, such as town planning, inveighing against the ‘Nordic architecture’ of the hotels and villas built by foreigners, characterised by a ‘hasty and mystifying bad taste’. For the nationalist Federzoni, in Gardone, ‘one truly realises that one is no longer master of one’s own home’ (De Frenzi 1909; Mazza 2010, 24–28).

At the same time, the growing hostility towards foreign tourists also expressed itself in various periodicals linked to the Garda area: *L'Eco del Baldo* published an article in which the aforementioned Celli spoke of tourism from Austria as ‘a large stream of German flesh that invades and changes everything, imposing itself and demanding, increasingly crowding the shores of our beautiful lake’. For Celli, ‘it is nauseating and even irritating to see all those grey and green-haired subjects blindly follow each other like sheep, squeezing together the woollen bodies with which our steamers regularly overflow! In front of that stream of flesh we almost disappear, we no longer hear yes but *ja*, we are no longer on the shores of the lake but *am See*’. In response to the question of who was responsible for all this, Celli said: ‘The culprits are the Italians who, in an attempt to partake in the lucrative hospitality industry, would give up their homes, their beds and perhaps even more!’ (Simoni 2001a 171).

Conversely, hotel managers and shopkeepers, who actively organised and promoted the area, took a different view. In 1907, on Fuchs’s initiative, the health resort committee was transformed into the thermal resort cooperative of Gardone. In the same year, the Pro Benaco association was founded, which was determined – with the help of a newsletter – ‘to promote the progress and prosperity of the region and coordinate its economic, moral and intellectual improvement’. The merchants organised themselves into the Society for Merchants and various entrepreneurs modernised their hotels (such as the luxurious Hotel Savoy Palace), while the municipal administration continued its policy of improving services through the realisation of public works, including new connecting roads, promenades, the enlargement of the central Wimmer square, reforestation projects, sports competitions and events.<sup>8</sup>

### ‘More Italian tourists on Lake Garda’

The various pro- and anti-foreigner positions converged on the need to attract more Italian tourists to Garda, independently from the presence of foreign tourists. The periodical *Pro Benaco* insisted on the modernisation of services ‘so that tourists – whether



national or foreign – may always enjoy their stay in the Garda region'.<sup>9</sup> In July 1909, in the aftermath of the Verona assembly, the periodical stressed the importance of 'combating the exclusively German character of what is at present a colony' and insisted on the enhancement of a cosmopolitan holiday and health resort, 'which will overcome the Germanising penetration and set things straight'. According to the article's author, the decisive factor was the improvement of connections with neighbouring towns so that Italian tourists could reach Lake Garda more easily. Only in this way would it be possible to 'attract, encourage [and] establish a current of national elements that would visit, get to know [and] inhabit the region; the only one that could overcome the predominant and exclusive German character of the present colony'.<sup>10</sup>

More Italian tourists on Lake Garda: this was also the aim of the *Rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano*, of which 180,000 copies were distributed in Italy and abroad. In the absence of any form of state intervention, the Italian Touring Club (hereafter TCI) became a decisive player on the Italian and international scene (Pivato 2006). In fact, for a long time, the state did not intervene directly in the tourism sector, which it considered had no place in the country's growth and modernisation. In reality, however, tourism revenues were a positive contribution to the balance of payments and eventually contributed to offsetting the cost of importing raw materials and industrial machines. It was not until 1910 that a tourist tax was imposed (Law No. 863 of 11 December 1910). The tax was levied on hotels and health spas, and the first resorts to introduce it were located precisely on Lake Garda (Salò and Sirmione), on the Ligurian coast and in Tuscany (Berrino 2011, 195–200). The TCI, by contrast, had long sustained that the hospitality industry should be built on strategic choices, solid programmes and new forms of promotion, drawing inspiration from the most advanced countries in this field, such as Switzerland, France and Austria (Pasini 2021).

From this perspective, knowledge of the Alps and Lake Garda depended very much on the improvement of roads and railways – in other words, transport. What was lacking, according to the TCI, was 'that coordination and completion of the road system [...] which is now, fortunately, being arranged with serious intentions and renewed energy'.<sup>11</sup> In fact, during that period, several transport projects were discussed at length: the proposal for an overland connection between Gargnano and Riva eventually came to a standstill owing to financial problems and bureaucracy, like the project for a Brescia–Trento railway that was meant to run along the entire riviera.<sup>12</sup> However, in the years leading up to the First World War, sections of road were built that connected residential areas on the upper side of the lake to the coast,<sup>13</sup> and the tramway extended its route (Ebranati 1988). Thanks to the arrival of Italian holidaymakers, many increasingly believed that tourism was a necessary means to emancipate the riviera.

Appeals for an increased presence of Italian tourists also arose directly from the unredeemed Trentino region, where a great number of Italian-language guides and articles to promote the area were published. The most authoritative voice was that of Cesare Battisti who, on several occasions, urged the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Italy to visit Trentino and its beautiful attractions (Biguzzi 2008). During the international exhibition in Milan in 1906, a brochure was distributed whose text could be traced back to Battisti and which can be considered a sort of manifesto of patriotic tourism in Trentino:

The inhabitants of Trentino are Italian. Trentino has always contributed to Italian culture. In the last century, the names of Antonio Rosmini, Giovanni Prati, Giovanni Canestrini and Giovanni Segantini completed an impressive list of learned men, historians, naturalists, geographers and artists from Trentino who would do honour to any country. With these names, no less than with its vicissitudes, Trentino reminds other Italian regions of its existence and hopes that the Italians

will neither continue to neglect it nor fail to consider the invitation of brothers to brothers: Italians, visit Trentino! (Bagnaresi 2014, 65).

In Trentino as in the border territories, the anti-Austrian campaign to attract Italian tourists to the Garda area continued in the following years and was perfectly in line with the irredentist aspirations of Trentino Italians. The latter saw tourism as an eminently civilised activity and an opportunity to feel connected with the homeland (for example, through membership of the Italian Alpine Club and the Tourist Club), as opposed to the somewhat grotesque rivalry of those who arrived in the region from the north to give the mountain peaks German names (Morosini 2009; Ambrosi 2012; Carrara 2015).

In early 1912, *La Rivista del Garda* – a fortnightly magazine created to support the activities of the Lake Garda Office of Propaganda in Italy – invited its readers to ‘gather all our forces so that more and more Italians will come to Lake Garda’.<sup>14</sup> The magazine mainly covered tourist issues but without ignoring the widespread patriotic sentiment of the time. Several articles thus paid tribute to the Italian soldiers fighting in the Libyan War, which for many marked the end of the belle époque in Italy and Europe (Micheletta and Ungari 2013): ‘A warm greeting of admiration to our troops who with so much valour hold high the glory of the Italian name’.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the overall tone of *La Rivista* in those years was less aggressive compared to the bitterness that the debate had reached in 1908 and 1909; instead, it shifted its criticism towards those in Italy who sought to denigrate the riviera, classifying it as a foreign land or ‘a German country’.<sup>16</sup>

The situation changed in 1914 when Fuchs, the then mayor of Gardone, had to refute an accusation made by the Milanese newspaper *Il secolo*, which claimed that ‘an Austro-German consulate’ had been opened in the heart of Lake Garda. This news was deemed to be untrue ‘since the town of Gardone was, among other things, completely deserted by foreigners. As for the infamous slander that fiercely Italophobic supporters of the German supremacy reside in our town council, I protest with all the strength of my soul’.<sup>17</sup>

### The German-speaking enclave in Italian territory

Although the majority of the German-speaking holidaymakers on the western shore of Lake Garda (i.e. on Italian territory) resided in Gardone Riviera, they did not look down on the neighbouring towns and villages of Fasano, Maderno, Gargnano, Barbarano and Salò. The community consisted of thousands of people whose lives have been recorded in the chronicles of *Der Bote*. This German-language newspaper, printed on the shores of the Benaco between 1900 and 1914, weekly from October to May and then monthly from June to September, was circulated in Gardone as well as the neighbouring towns along the coast, where other German-speaking holidaymakers were staying. It was promoted by the journalist Ottomar Piltz, a Milan correspondent of the *Magdeburger Zeitung*, born in Dresden in 1864. Health reasons forced Piltz – a supporter of the *Winterkurort* – to move to Maderno on Lake Garda in 1894, where he was active in various organisations and even directed the local *Kurverein* until he died, at the age of 44, in 1908. What emerges from the articles and contributions published in *Der Bote* is that the community which had settled on the Garda’s riviera tended to represent itself as a *Zwischenraum*, a ‘space in between’ in which the different cultures were not entirely impenetrable; rather, their closeness in everyday life favoured exchanges and debates (Mor 2012, 10–81). Until the turn of the twentieth century, these ideals of peaceful coexistence were shared both by Germans and a part of the Italian population, as a reminder of a transnational culture in which Italy – ever since the Grand Tour (De Seta 2011; Brilli



2014, 15–58) – had hosted the protagonists of European culture for centuries (Finotti 2016, 437–439). Subsequently, the seeds of mutual aversion began to grow and diplomatic tensions escalated (Corni 2008).

Aware of the situation, Giuseppe Zanardelli – president of the council from 1901 to 1903 and a resident of Maderno – took on a mediating role between the two communities. His intervention is well illustrated by a message sent to Königer, president of the health resort committee of Gardone, a few months before his death in December 1903.

I am most grateful to the foreign colony of this Benaco riviera and the Committee that you so worthily preside over for the kind and benevolent act of coming here by special steamer and bringing me their most welcome wishes and greetings. You who know in what esteem I hold the colony of which you are a conspicuous part, and what devotion I have especially to the noble Germanic nation that embraces Garda's charming basin with such exceptional and enthusiastic fondness, can be a faithful interpreter of this fervent and unceasing gratitude of mine.<sup>18</sup>

After the statesman's death, Königer published a letter in *Der Bote* to honour his memory.

We shall never forget the great evidence of benevolence shown to us by the deceased over the last 20 years [...] This Germanic colony, which Giuseppe Zanardelli declares 'certainly not to be a foreigner among us, but vibrant at every manifestation of effective *italianità*', offers its most heartfelt condolences to his family and close friends.<sup>19</sup>

*Der Bote* also approached the rising controversy between Italian residents and foreign tourists from the German perspective. A series of articles – written by Martin Birnbaum – on the Germanisation of Lake Garda, which explained both the Italian and the German points of view, concluded that the growing tension between residents and foreign guests did not originate in the Lake Garda area but was a sort of external machination, originating in the Tyrol region and in Verona, to economically damage the riviera of the Brescia province by keeping German tourists away.

An echo of the controversy, which lasted all summer long, can also be found in the words of the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1910, Paul Heyse, author of the *Novellen von Gardasee* (Mazza 2010). In a letter to a friend, Heyse complained about the hostility that had broken out on Lake Garda, which was directed more at the Germans than the Austrians. He added that 'if this silly conspiracy of the irredentists' – as Heyse defined it – 'had the effect that the winter guests of the many hotels in Gardone, Salò, Maderno and Gargnano retired, these small towns would fall back into poverty' (Mor 2012, 74).

In those years, the more than ten thousand holidaymakers in this area included leading figures of the German and Habsburg aristocracy and of art, culture, literature and music, as recorded in the attendance lists prepared by the health resort committee published in *Der Bote* (Raponi 2012, Mazza 1997, 185–195; Ferro and Ferro Francesconi 2000).

### A war fought on water

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the clash between Italians and Austrians shifted from land to water. Ferry services on Lake Garda began during the period of Austrian rule. In 1827, the first steamship – the *Arciduca Ranieri* – was launched and a regular navigation service was established that reached the main ports – Riva, Desenzano and Peschiera.

In addition to its role in the world of commerce, Lake Garda had also been of strategic military importance ever since the Risorgimento period, and battles had been fought on the lake's surface during the wars of independence (Faraoni 2009, 131; Faraoni 2014). Additionally, its status as a border area placed the lake at the centre of smuggling actions and espionage. For this reason, in 1886, a surveillance station was installed in the territory of Limone (on the national border) to monitor the lake and combat smuggling; in 1897, four torpedo boats of the Royal Navy equipped with electric searchlights were introduced, which would later be used for the defence of the lake during the Great War (Simoni 2001a).

As regards civil navigation, after the Veneto region was ceded to Italy, the Italian government entrusted the management of the lake's ferry services to the Società strade ferrate dell'alta Italia, and in 1885 to the Società delle ferrovie meridionali, better known as L'Adriatica. The fleet was renewed and the Austrian port of Riva del Garda remained a port of call; the steamships carried tourists from the north to Maderno, Gardone and Salò (Ogliari 1987, 139–188).

From 1870 onwards, the border cut Lake Garda in two from west to east, extending from Limone to Torbole. The Austrians kept some of their boats in service. Disputes between the Kingdom of Italy and the neighbouring Empire persisted even in the context of navigation. In 1909, a new steamship was launched with the patriotic name of *Italia*. A controversy erupted over the possibility that Austrian ships might enter into direct competition with Italian ones: could a foreign company land its steamships on Italian wharves? Should the Italian government allow the Austrians to build new ones?<sup>20</sup> The commander of the steamship *Mocenigo*, who was a resident of Riva, was even arrested and expelled from his municipality for 'seditious slogans' against the Empire during a boat trip in the company of three irredentist students.<sup>21</sup>

The topic of navigation also held centre stage in *La Rivista del Garda*, which ran until 31 May 1914. What was at stake was the definition of procedures, timetables and prices. The meetings between the lieutenant of Tyrol and the inspector of Garda Navigation became increasingly tense. In one of the last issues, *La Rivista del Garda* insisted that the contribution that the Austrian government was prepared to grant to the Italian navigation company would be disdainfully rejected.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, war was on the horizon. The Sarajevo incident, which occurred shortly afterwards, on 28 June 1914, initiated the 'useless slaughter'. Italy entered the conflict in May 1915. The border line was transformed into a front line even on Lake Garda, where the first war submarines were lowered into the water (Faraoni 2014).

### The end of an era

The call to 'Italianise' Garda in the years immediately before the outbreak of the war did not fall on deaf ears. Between 1912 and 1913, the press recorded an increased presence of Italian visitors. These were groups who, especially on Sundays, travelled to the towns located around the lake on excursions organised by companies or associations, taking advantage of the discounts that the navigation companies offered them. It is therefore possible to describe the years preceding the great catastrophe as a season of trips by Italians on Lake Garda.

In reality, foreign holidaymakers continued to visit Garda until 1914, while the flow of Italian tourists – encouraged by propaganda and improved road conditions – increased. With the war just around the corner, 'Garda's Italian Hour' eventually came, as the headlines of the *Rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano* read in December 1914, and the foreign tourists left the riviera.

And so a single factor, more decisive than any measure invoked by authorities and government, on which no one truly counted, drove the 'German hazard' from the

shores of Lake Garda. At the first blow of the furious storm that upsets the skies of Europe, the men from the north crossed the Alps. [...] Lake Garda, at the height of its season, is deserted. (*Rivista mensile* 1914)

After Italy entered the war in 1915, the border village of Limone was evacuated and its inhabitants were moved to the neighbouring towns of Maderno and Gardone, which had been populated by foreigners until two years earlier. They managed to return to their homes only at the end of the war (Vassalini 1931; Trebeschi and Fava 1990). Trentino and South Tyrol were assigned to Italy and Garda became entirely Italian (Berrino 2011, 195). Dozens of ‘ex-enemy properties’ (villas, hotels, land) were confiscated and entrusted to the Opera nazionale combattenti, which put them up for auction.<sup>23</sup> These included Villa Cargnacco, owned by the German art critic Henry Thode, now the Vittoriale degli Italiani in Gardone Riviera. The transformation of this d’Annunzio-style residence – designed by the architect Maroni – marked the end of the most extraordinary tourist season of Lake Garda. As the journalist Lorenzo Gigli wrote in 1915, in one of his letters from Garda: ‘Here, we truly have the feeling that a historical period has ended and a new one is beginning. Here, we understand the moral value of this war, which is above all a war of liberation. We jumped to our feet when the German grip was close to suffocating us’ (Gigli 1982, 45).

## Conclusion

Being a ‘vulnerable phenomenon’ (Leonardi 2014), tourism requires peace and stability to thrive (Butler and Suntikul 2013). However, during periods of crisis, like a conflict, the suspension or extreme slowdown of activities stimulates the development of new plans and innovative strategies and practices (Walton 2013; Pasini 2021). With the outbreak of the First World War, tourism became the first victim of the conflict on Lake Garda, as happened in the rest of Europe (Treves 1989; Capuzzo 2020). In fact, after the extraordinary season of the belle époque, nationalistic tensions and, subsequently, the prolongation of war operations changed the features of tourism in this sector and guided it towards a new phase of development.

From the 1920s onwards, the massive handover of various properties confiscated from the enemy after the end of the war marked the final demise of an era. In 1919, the Ente Nazionale Industria Turistica (ENIT) was founded, which took over the role of promoting and planning from the TCI. The ‘new’ tourists began to prefer summer holidays and, as the sunny season started, the curtain fell on the winter holiday. Not many years passed, though, before the lake was once again visited by foreign tourists, who would continue – as they do today – to consider it their *Gardasee*.

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## Notes

1. The Municipal Archive of Gardone Riviera (Archivio del Comune di Gardone Riviera, hereafter ACGR), series 1898–1940, folder 12, contains ample information on the administrative life of Angelo Fuchs, described as a ‘fervent patriot’ and ‘chosen soul’ who ‘dedicated the most and best part of his life to Gardone’. The folder also contains letters and telegrams of condolences from numerous mayors of the area on the occasion of his death on 7 April 1920, as well as the text of the official commemoration celebrated in the town council by council member Bortolo Vassalini.

2. ACGR, series 1898–1940, folder 7, 1909–1910. Copies of documents referring to Celli's administrative activity are held in the Brescia State Archive, Fondo Sottoprefettura di Salò, folder 64.
3. ACGR, series 1898–1940, folder 2, 'Elenco pubblici esercizi'.
4. *La Provincia* 1908a and 1908b; *Pro Benaco* 1908.
5. ACGR, series 1898–1940, folder 6, 'Lettera della Società Dante Alighieri al Comune di Gardone Riviera', 29 March 1908.
6. *La Sentinella* 1908.
7. *Pro Benaco* 1909b.
8. Numerous files related to these interventions can be found in ACGR, series 1797–1898, folders 14–17. There is a large file on the Wimmer square in ACGR, series 1898–1945, folder 4, 1903–1904.
9. *Pro Benaco* 1909a.
10. *Pro Benaco* 1909c.
11. *Rivista mensile* 1910.
12. *La Rivista del Garda* 1912f and 1912g. See also Solitro 1897.
13. *La Rivista del Garda* 1913.
14. *La Rivista del Garda* 1912a.
15. *La Rivista del Garda* 1912b.
16. *La Rivista del Garda* 1912g.
17. ACGR, folder 10, 1914–1915, 'Lettera dal Municipio al direttore del giornale Il secolo di Milano', 4 November 1914.
18. *Der Bote* 1903.
19. *Der Bote* 1904.
20. *La Rivista del Garda* 1912e.
21. *La Rivista del Garda* 1912c and 1912d.
22. *La Rivista del Garda* 1914.
23. ACGR, series 1898–1940, bb. 10–11.

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### Italian summary

Questo saggio si pone l'obiettivo di ricostruire l'aspro dibattito – locale e nazionale – sviluppatosi negli anni precedenti la Grande guerra intorno alla consistente e pervasiva presenza straniera in un territorio di confine come il lago di Garda. Qui la crescente tensione nazionalistica che precedette il conflitto si intrecciò con le istanze turistiche. Il turismo come fenomeno sociale, dunque, viene assunto come osservatorio privilegiato per decifrare le trasformazioni del contesto generale del periodo. Nata a cavallo tra Ottocento e Novecento dall'impegno di figure di origine austro-germanica, l'industria del forestiero sul Garda conobbe un periodo molto florido fino alle soglie della Grande guerra. Non mancarono tuttavia gli oppositori a quel modello di sviluppo. I contrasti si acuirono fino a trasformare nella percezione dei residenti i 'forestieri' in 'nemici'. E il Garda divenne sempre di più, uno spazio conteso, un simbolo delle tensioni del tempo.

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