

Mountains at War: Visualizing warfare in the mountains: What photographic records do and do not tell about war in high altitude on the Stelvio frontline 1915-1918

Introduction

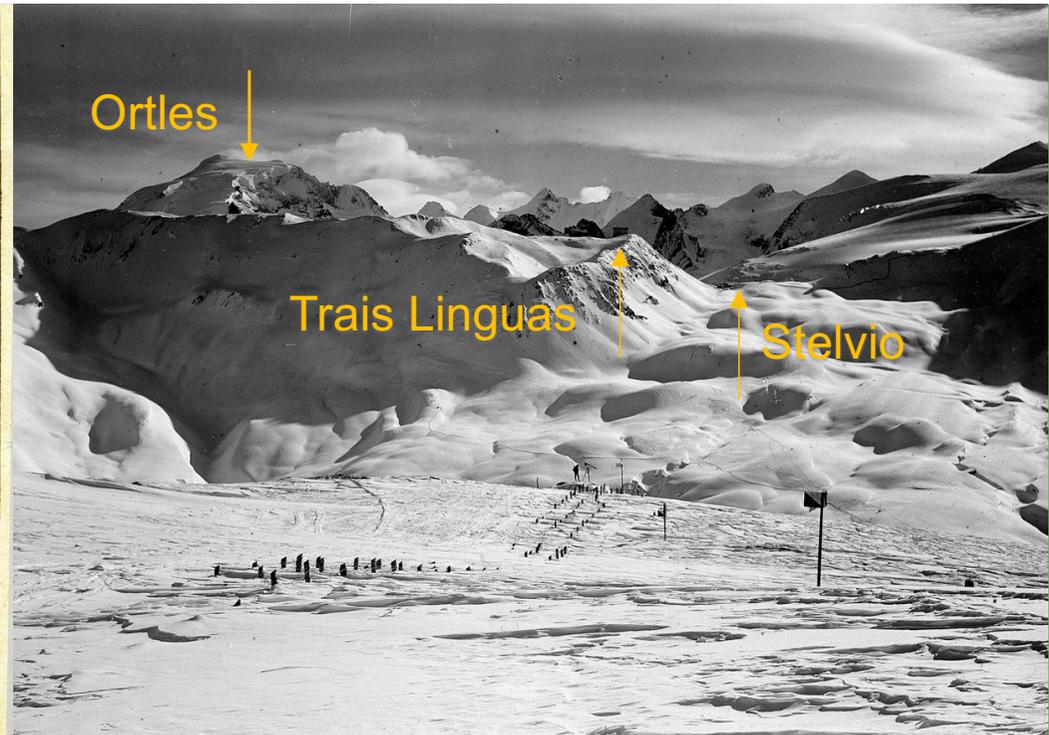
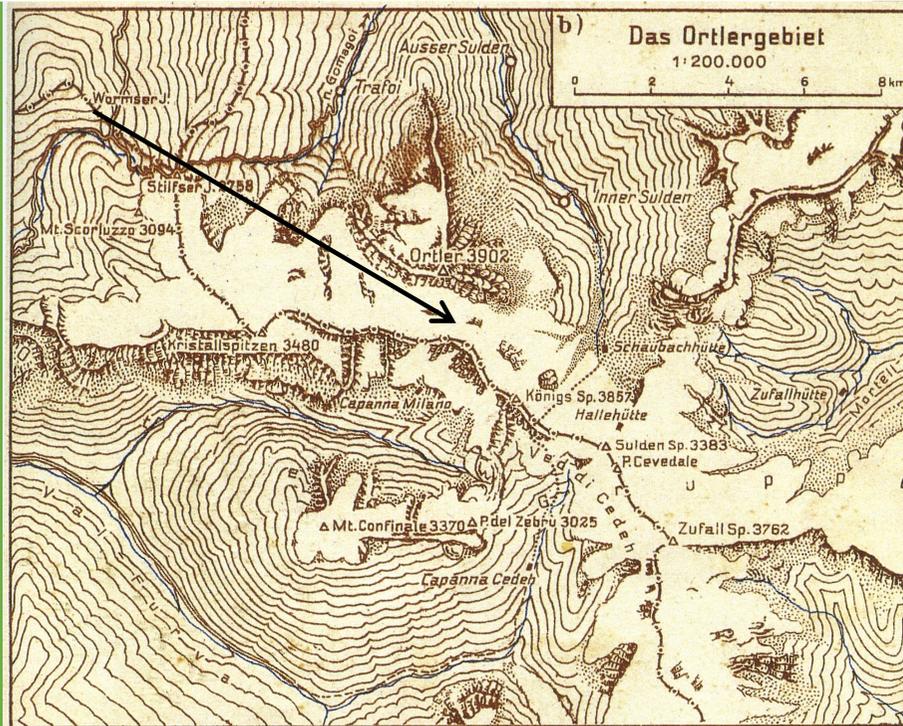
The Ortles-Stelvio region

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The sources

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- Photographic Records of the General Staff of the Swiss Army (Swiss Federal Archives)
- Moritz Freiherr von Lempruch: Der König der deutschen Alpen
- Private Records of Franz Haller
- Private Records of Rudolf Staub (Archives of ETH Zurich)

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The authors of the sources

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2. Geographisch-archivistische Sektion.

- Geographic and archival section of the Swiss Army General Staff
- Moritz Freiherr von Lempruch, commanding officer of Rayon I
- Rudolf Staub, Lt. of the Swiss Army
- Franz Haller, Lt. of the Austro-Hungarian Army

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Visualising Warfare

depends

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- on the aims of the photographer or of those in whose mandate he did his job
- on the technical equipment
- on the abilities and knowledge of the photographer
- on the conditions of warfare
- on conditions of nature such as weather, topography, etc.

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Visualising Warfare

The following categories apply

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Categories according to Hoffmann 1982

- Curiosities of war: "that's what we saw"
- Everyday Life / Conditions of War
- Landscape / Warscape
- Recreation and "Tourist Activities"
- Men, Machines and Destruction
- Victorious Commander
- Remaining a human

Categories adapted by Segesser 2023

- Battling the elements
- Everyday Life / Conditions of War
- Alpine Landscape / Alpine Warscape
- Mountaineering and "Tourist Activities"
- Military Preparedness
- Commanders and Visitors
- Staging humans in nature

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Battling the elements:

Where nature joins forces with the enemy

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- Real battling with the elements (hailstorms, snowstorms, avalanches) is not visible!
- Cleaning up of the consequences of avalanches or snowstorms is shown
- Pictures present the moving of men, supplies, guns and other munitions

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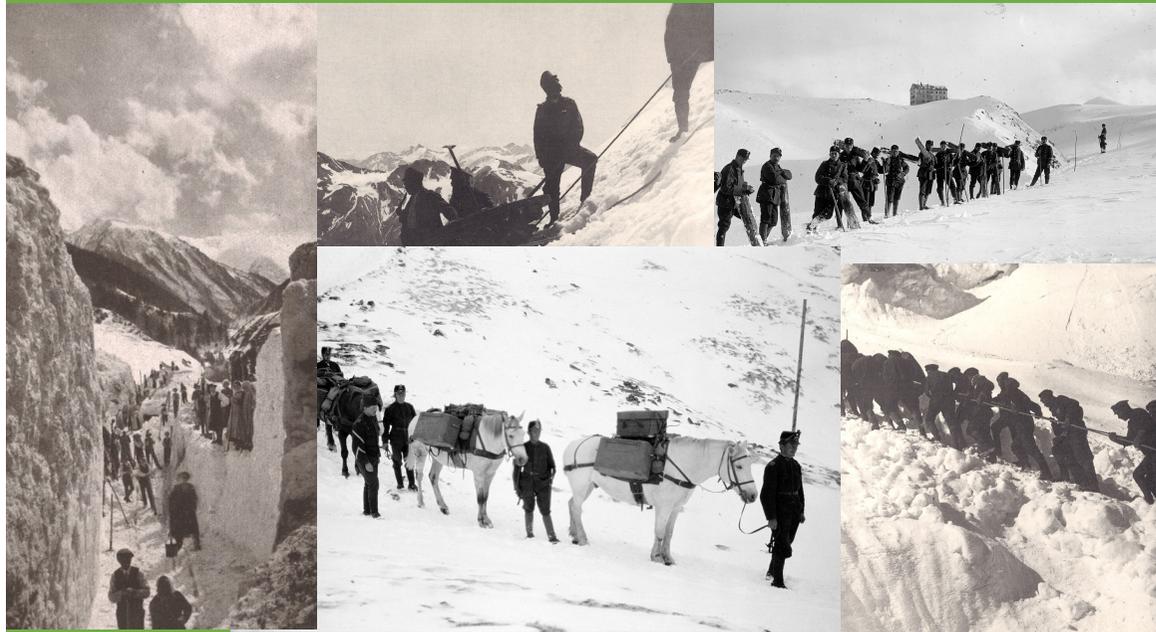
Battling the elements:

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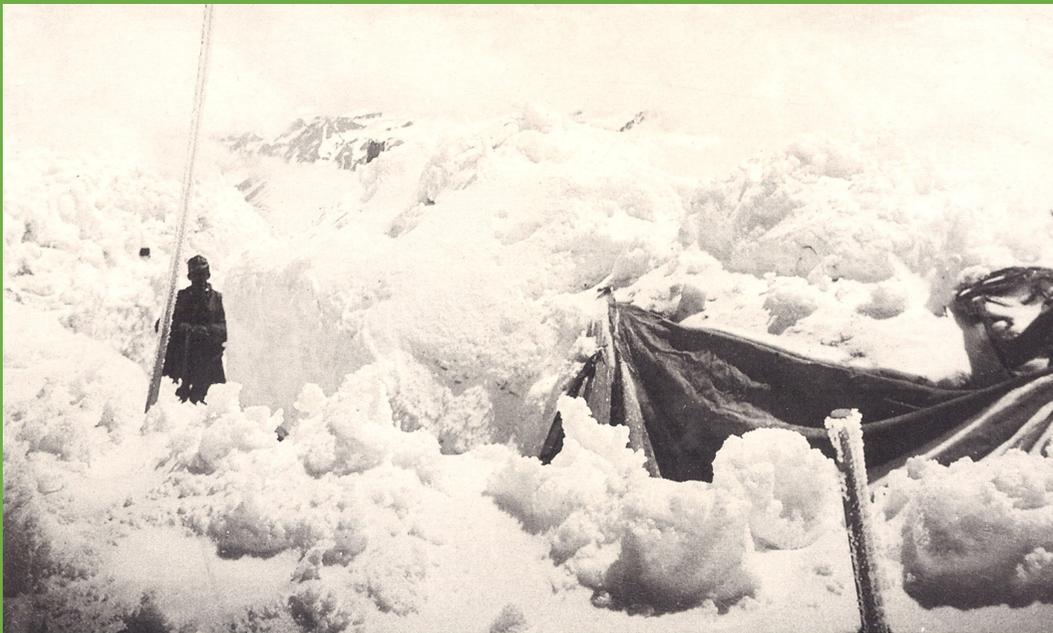
Everyday Life:

Conditions of War

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- Most of the time pictures of everyday life are staged and do not really show the conditions of war
- Pictures are mainly showing situations inside or outside barracks (or in the Swiss case hotels)
- Often men at rest, in or on beds are visible on such photographs

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Everyday Life:

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Alpine Landscape

Alpine Warscape

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- Many photographic records try to move the natural alpine scenery into the centre, but military aspects remain visible at close look
- Combat as such remained invisible and the war-related transformation of a landscape into a warscape was often only insinuated

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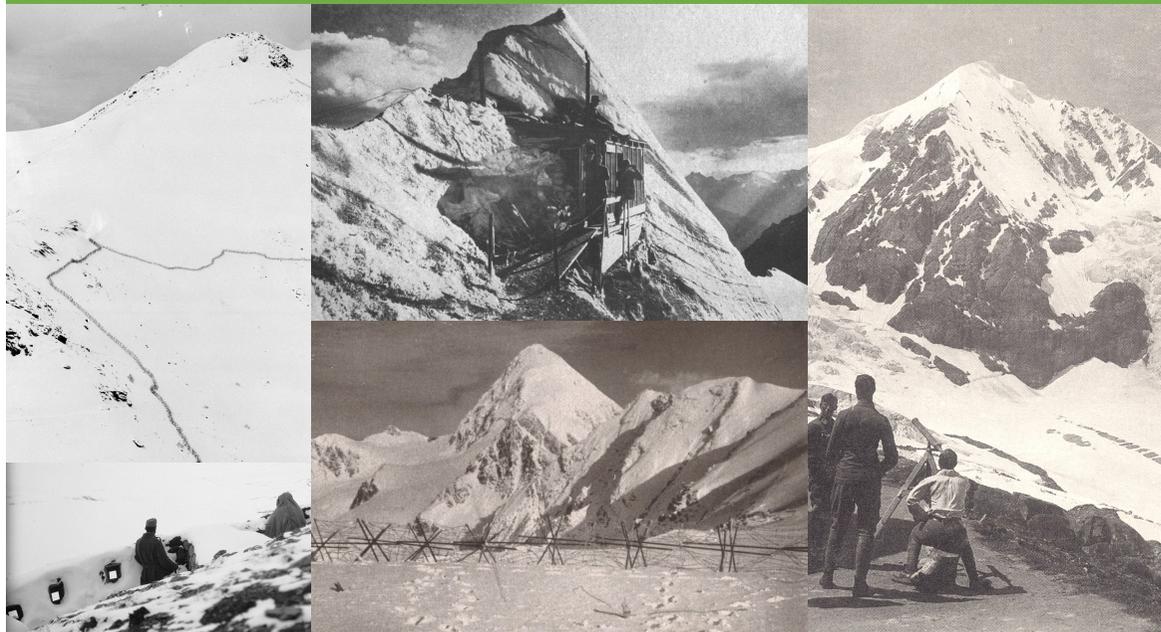
Alpine Landscape

Alpine Warscape

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Mountaineering

and “tourist activities”

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- Except for the fact that some military equipment is visible some photos of the war celebrate mountaineering achievements as if in peacetime
- Soldiers present themselves within a natural environment often as if they were simple “tourists” or mountaineers. Their military function is often secondary

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- As a consequence of the war in an alpine environment skiing became more popular and more visible
- The war brought about the construction of many ropeways or cable cars that made the alpine environment more accessible at least for the duration of the war

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Military Preparedness

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- As surprising attacks had a high potential of success, when fighting in high altitude, military preparedness was extremely important
- Photographs, however, only rarely show real military preparations. They were often taken to reassure the viewer for whom the photographers took the photos that soldiers were ready even in difficult conditions

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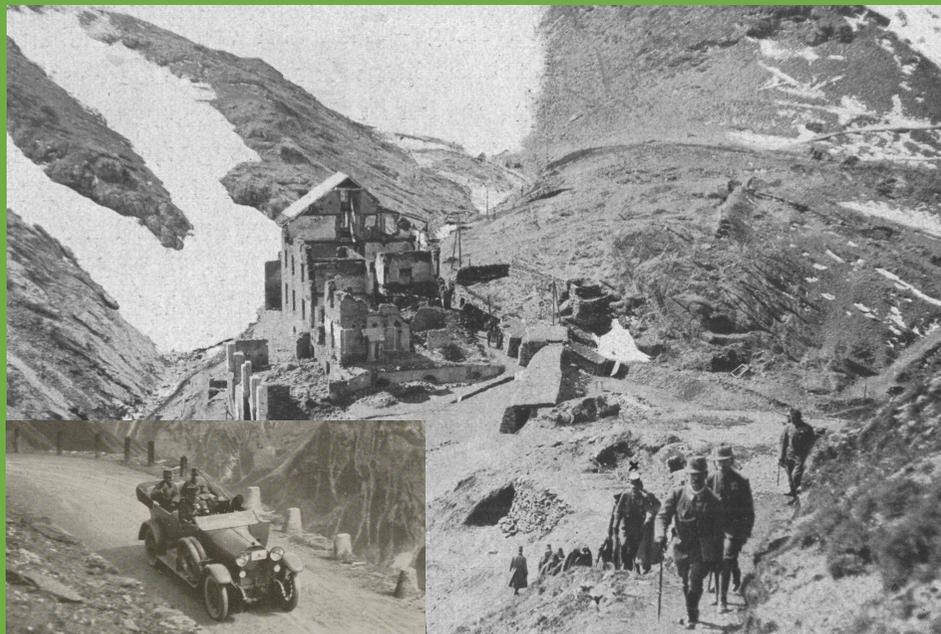
Commanders

and visitors

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- Commanding officers such as Emperor Charles. Field Marshal Conrad von Hötzendorff or General Wille visited the Stelvio frontline
- Photographic records even show them in reach of enemy positions, a fact that shows, how quiet the front-line was at least close to the border of neutral Switzerland

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Commanders

and visitors

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- Not only commanding officers visited the Stelvio frontline, but also foreigners such as General Pertew Pasha
- Visits at the border were also frequent amongst subaltern officers as well as soldiers on both sides of the Stelvio frontline, not least because it was safe close to the Swiss border

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Staging Humans

in nature

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Instead of showing that humans remain human in the midst of the western front (Hoffmann), on the alpine front photographers want to stage humans in a way to show they can prevail over nature and / or dominate it in conditions, that humans normally avoided.

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In conclusion

Three points

- War time photography on the Stelvio frontline in the years 1915 to 1918 neither showed the reality of warfare nor did it present the battling of the elements. Rather – at least in its official version – it tried to reassure viewers that men were still in control.
- Most of the pictures were staged, in order to show at the same time a readiness in war, individual achievements in an environment that was normally not accessible in this way to humans, and a sense of normality into the abnormal situation of war in high altitude.
- Photographers often put the Alpine landscape at the centre of their pictures. Men were mainly visible as visitors in an environment, which was not usually theirs, but which they could master. A war-related transformation of a landscape into a warscape was often only insinuated.

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Thank you very much
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Daniel Marc Segesser

24 August 2023

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