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Viribus Unitis, SMS

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The Austro-Hungarian battleship *Viribus Unitis* was commissioned in reaction to the newly built Italian dreadnought, *Dante Alighieri*. The *Viribus Unitis* was the first Austro-Hungarian ship of the so-called *Tegetthoff-Class*. During the First World War the *Viribus Unitis* saw action only two times, in 1915 and 1918.

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1. Construction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Austro-Hungarian navy developed the [dreadnought](#) class of ships. The term “dreadnought” comes from the Royal Navy’s ship *Dreadnought*, which was launched in 1907. It was one of the “all big gun ships”, which lacked medium [artillery](#) but contained double the number of heavy guns. The decision to build such a large ship was based on lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War (1905), in which large calibres had been decisive for the naval battle.

When Italy decided to build this type of ship, navy commanding officer Admiral [Rudolf Graf Montecuccoli \(1843-1922\)](#) also demanded a battleship division consisting of four dreadnoughts (the so-called *Tegetthoff-Class*) for Austria-Hungary. General-shipping civil engineer [Siegfried Popper \(1848-1933\)](#) designed the ships. Although Austria-Hungary had the technical ability to build such large battleships, it had no funding. As there was no budget foreseen for the construction of

battleships, Montecuccoli circumvented authorization and confronted the Minister of War as well as both Ministers of Finance with the finished ships.

After being built in record time at the shipyard Stabilimento Tecnico Triestino (Technical Establishment of Trieste), the division's flag-ship, the *Viribus Unitis*, was finally put into service in October 1912, a few months before its Italian counterpart, *Dante Alighieri*. A strong supporter of the navy, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#), had taken part at the ship's launch in June 1911. It was the first Dreadnought completed in the Mediterranean and the world's first battleship in service with artillery triple-gun-towers.

2. Prelude to the war

On 24 June 1914 Franz Ferdinand and his wife [Sophie, Archduchess of Austria \(1868-1914\)](#) travelled from Trieste to the muzzle of Neretva on board the *Viribus Unitis* to participate in manoeuvres in Bosnia. After the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, the Austro-Hungarian navy had the sad duty to transport the corpses back to Vienna. This task again fell to the *Viribus Unitis*. At half-mast and under ringing church bells the ship slowly sailed along the coast to Trieste.

3. The First World War

The most spectacular action in which the *Viribus Unitis* was involved during World War I was the bombardment of strategically important targets in Ancona when Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary in 1915. The only other combat mission conducted by the *Viribus Unitis* was the action against the lock of the Otranto Street in 1918 where all heavy units took part. Most journeys were merely for shooting exercises in the channel of Fasana.

In October 1918 the navy, like the monarchy, was dissolved. [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) submitted the fleet by Depeche to the newly founded SHS state (State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs), which was not yet recognized by international law. In the morning hours of 1 November 1918 the ship trembled under an explosion and fourteen minutes later all that remained were the ruins of the ship. Two Italian combat divers had attached a mine to the hull. The number of sailors who were killed by the attack remains unclear; the commanding officer [Janko Vukovic de Podkapelski \(1871-1918\)](#) was among the fallen.

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