

## THE BATTLE FOR GORIZIA

General Cadorna and the Italian Army were the last to know on which side they should deploy forces. Final decisions about the war were made known to the ChoD a few days before entering the war.

Because of that, regrouping of the army was already started but in an assembly area which fits both possible solutions between Lombardia and Veneto. Once it was clear which front was to be reached, the army was regrouped mainly on the right side of the Piave River. Only a few cavalry units started to move toward the east while mountain troops were deployed on the highest top of the Alps.

At that time the Italian army received the task from the government to raise the Italian youth, to give them the chance to leave for the first time their villages, move to something totally new, to wear more than a suit and a pair of clogs. Each regiment was composed and fed by people coming from different provinces of the kingdom, allowing the Italians know each other and move from town to town every three-four years. Doing so, the units, never setting up too many liaisons with the hosting cities, became affordable in anti-riot duties.

Up to that moment, the Italian Army had had no chance to be employed all together. After the unlucky Third War of Independence (1866), closed by the defeat of Custoza, the army run only large “police campaigns” like the suppression of “Brigantaggio” in the south provinces of the new kingdom or the East- and North-Africa Campaign.

The size of the army grew quickly and the number of regular officers was increased by young university students who became enlisted officers after an “accelerated preparation course”. Their number would have never been enough to satisfy the need and compensate the losses.

Because of the geographic theatre, General Cadorna was prepared to conduct two different kinds of manoeuvre. If Italy had to fight alone against Austria the idea was to keep the large part of the army on the Piave River, to get in contact with the enemy on the border and to drive it slowly back from the Isonzo and Torre River to the main resistance positions on the Piave and Mount Grappa line, already identified as the only possible line to stop the advancing enemy. On the other hand, if other countries were involved in a conflict against Austria Cadorna planned to keep the enemy busy all around Trentino Mountains and Cadore, and push hard toward the Isonzo River, to reach Trieste and Ljubljana first then decide to move to Vienna or Budapest.

It's easy to understand today that the second plan was the dream of a Napoleonic war. The war itself was something totally different from the independence war fought by the Piemontese later on Italian Army. Luckily the same General Cadorna would be the first to understand that the situation had changed and war was taking a different shape than previous ones.

What remains unchanged was the necessity to avoid the danger of a penetration from Trentino to the Padana plains on the rear of the army deployed. The possibility of a penetration from there was the “worst scenario” to be considered.

The only possible way to avoid this danger, as the shape of the border (which looked like the letter “S” on its side) would force the army to fight a continuously offensive war, was to keep the initiative without rest from the very beginning of the war until the so-called Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo River and the retreat to the Piave River.

At the declaration of war the Austrian army was mainly deployed on the Russian and Balkan front, with just a few troops guarding the Italian border. Once the war broke out, the Austro-Hungarian forces left the plain to the advancing Italian army retreating on the mountains on the left side of the Isonzo Valley which were perfect to arrange a defensive line. In only two points of the border they left a “bridge head” on the right side: Tolmino and Gorizia. Those were the two main gates of access into the heart of the empire. Cadorna’s idea was to enter the line from one or both main gates and proceed toward the enemy capital city.

During 1915 the army experienced the atrocity of the entrenched war, where a small strongpoint with a machine gun was enough to stop and destroy an infantry regiment. Bravery was not enough to win a battle, cavalry had no more room to ride in the battlefield, artillery and engineers were more necessary and useful than other branches. A totally new system of fighting was necessary.

### *The Springtime Offensive*

Right before the sixth battle the Austro-Hungarian Army launched an important offensive on the Trentino Alps in an attempt to reach Vicenza and Venezia in order to close all the logistical lines of support of the Italian Army deployed in Veneto. The Cadorna nightmare suddenly became real.

Thanks to the fact that the Germans didn’t help the Austro-Hungarian attempt (actually we were not yet in war with Germany even if German troops were moved to South Tirol in 1915), the difficulty to feed and sustain the effort for the supply route through the mountains, the simultaneous Russian offensive, but also the resistance opposed by our soldiers, the offensive didn’t reach the planned target.

In order to prevent the breakthrough which Italy was suspecting, General Cadorna organized a new army which actually had no chance to be employed.

Once it was clear that the Austrian offensive was about to end (mid-June), General Cadorna decided to use the troops to eliminate the bridge head of Gorizia.

Easy to say, difficult to realize. With an impressive effort of means of transport, train and trucks, all the units and artillery were redeployed around the pocket on the Isonzo shores in a covert wide operation.

As the springtime offensive was a strategic surprise for the Italians in terms of the choice of the front sector, the quick reaction of the Italian Army with preparing and conducting an offensive on the Gorizia area was the strategic surprise Cadorna made for his enemy.

### *Battle Area*

The bridge head of Gorizia was established on a series of strong points and an “entrenched field” hold by the 58<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division lead by General Zeidler. From north to south these strongpoints were the Mount Sabotino, and the hilly area called “il Collio” with Oslavia, the village of Grafenberg, Podgora and Calvario. Then the line followed the Isonzo River up to the hill foot of the San Michele Mountain which connected the lines to the “Carso hills” till the Adriatic Sea near Monfalcone.

The Austrian troops were well deployed and determined to resist. During the first five battles around Gorizia the name of the Mountains and the small villages became well known to the soldiers and the huge losses suffered by both armies showed how tough the fight was.

Gorizia, cute vacation city in the southern part of the Empire, is situated in the middle of a large valley flanked by mountains deeply stretching into Slovenia.

### *The Deployed Forces*

The 58<sup>th</sup> Division was in Gorizia since the very beginning of the hostilities. It was made of three brigades, two of mountain infantry and one of Landsturm and had two brigades across the river and one on the right side.

Its commander, General Erwin Zeidler had managed to resist five attacks on the city and organized local counterattacks, too, as in January 1916 before the fifth battle, in the Oslavia sector. He was so sure that the Italian Army had enough of the springtime offensive that he asked and obtained to go on live.

An entire corps was deployed on the Italian side, with the specific target to conquer Mount Sabotino, Oslavia, Grafenberg, Podgora and reach the right side of the river. To each of the targets an entire division was designated. The goal of the battle was the elimination of the bridge head. As already mentioned, a new combat system was necessary to fight this new Great War. The number of losses made General Cadorna very concerned about “saving the lives of infantrymen”, arriving to declare the end of operations which were under the control of his Army Commanders.

The new idea of fighting was to conduct very short but massive artillery firing directed on the first line, and then direct firing on the command post, supply depot, second line troops.

Attacking infantry start moving out of the trenches while artillery firing was still hitting the first line. New kind of artillery pieces (bombard) had the task to open passages through the barbed wire obstacles giving infantrymen the possibility to pass over them and reach the enemy lines before defenders had the chance to come out of their shelters.

### *The Plan*

The operational plan was new only in terms of techniques and the adjustments made between artillery and infantry. A number of liaison officers of the artillery units were detached in the infantry commands to direct firing. The main goal was to eliminate the beach head. Following a new wave of a more sequential kind of strategy, the next target

might have been Tolmino beach head. From June to the end of July all forces and supplies destined to the battles were concentrated in the area moving away from the Vicenza sector. The possibility to exploit the possible victory was not really taken into consideration. Moving infantry out of the protection of the artillery is not a danger but a suicide. And to move the artillery to new positions needs an enormous effort in terms of animals to tow the guns and to transport ammunitions. Even if a number of modern weapons and engines are employed, for some aspect this was still a war relying on the human capacities of soldiers.

### *The Battle*

The battle starts early morning on 6<sup>th</sup> August. Under an enormous pressure the 58<sup>th</sup> Division loose the Sabotino Mountain on the left of the battlefield. This first victory is gained with a quick assault and no losses, conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Badoglio. He is to become quite famous later on. On the right side Mount San Michele is finally conquered by our infantry (outside the AoR of the 58<sup>th</sup>). General Zeidler (who was, as we said, on leave the first day of the offensive) knew that he could not resist more than one or two days without risking to lose the entire division.

On the second day of the fight his troops start a series of counterattacks to gain time to make possible disengagement of the main body of the division and the reinforcements received. The movement is completed at night time. All the Austro-Hungarian units are on the left side of the Isonzo River. Instead of a fighting in the city, the Austrian Commander is authorized to move back to newly prepared positions around the city.

On 8<sup>th</sup> August the Italian troops complete the clearing of the beach head and a few patrols move across the river. The enemy is gone. Engineers work hard to fix the bridges. A cavalry unit is organized to try to exploit the success but the enemy is already fortified on a new line east of the city.

The attempt to move over the new Austro-Hungarian defence lines continues until the 16<sup>th</sup> August without success.

### *Conclusions*

What is important from the military point of view is that the battle was the first success of the Italian Army in a field battle against the Austro-Hungarian one.

It was finally clear that reaching a goal of any kind, cooperation among the branches had to be stricter. Hidden preparation had to be achieved at all cost. Long artillery preparations (one week) had no other results than informing the enemy that an offensive was about to come.

The opening of the static obstacles (barbed wire) was to be done with heavy artillery. There was no need to wait for the artillery to stop firing before moving the troops forward. "Outnumbering" the enemy was the only possible way to break through the modern entrenched lines. Cavalry and other mobile troops (transported by trucks) had to be ready and on call to exploit the victory. On the other hand, we learn that giving up terrain to reach a better position to defend was not dishonourable, and that the best way to save soldiers and material was to be flexible.

Only during the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo River, known as the Bainsizza Battle, the Italian Army was to realize again a situation similar to Gorizia and again the lack of reserve did not lead to the results it was possible to achieve.

On the opposite front the risk of collapse was so high and close, that later on, following all the possible lessons of whatever happened so far during the campaign, the Caporetto Offensive ran over the Italian troops.

On the strategic point of view, General Cadorna developed very quickly the idea that only with a common effort was it really possible to end the war. Unfortunately his opinion was not heard and the enemy had the chance to fight on one front at a time, moving the troops quickly from east to west, realizing big concentrations in short time when needed.

Gorizia was the first important “enemy” city to be conquered by the “Entente” since 1914 on the western front. It was also the only important victory for the Entente in Europe in 1916.

*Cristiano Maria Dechigi*

#### HARC GORIZIÁÉRT

*Rezümé*

A szerző Olaszország első világháborús szereplésének egyik fontos epizódját, a hatodik isonzói csatát elemzi. A csatát az olasz és az osztrák–magyar hadsereg vívta 1916. augusztus 6. és 16. között. A tanulmány olasz szemszögből mutatja be Cadorna tábornok hadviselési elképzeléseit, majd leírást ad a csata helyszínéről, a bevetett haderőről és a csata műveleti tervéről. Összegzésként a szerző kiemeli, hogy ez volt az első alkalom, hogy az olasz hadsereg csatában legyőzte az osztrák–magyar hadsereget. A tanulmány felsorolja azokat az olasz harcászati változtatásokat, amelyek a hadsereg győzelméhez vezettek.

*Cristiano Maria Dechigi*

#### DIE SCHLACHT UM GÖRZ (GORIZIA)

*Resümee*

Der Verfasser analysiert eine bedeutende Episode der Teilnahme Italiens am Ersten Weltkrieg, die sechste Isonzoschlacht. Die Schlacht wurde zwischen dem 6. und 16. August 1916 von den Streitkräften Italiens und Österreich-Ungarns ausgetragen. Die Studie stellt die Vorstellungen von General Cadorna im Hinblick auf die Kriegsführung aus italienischer Sicht vor und gibt im Anschluss daran eine Beschreibung über den Schauplatz der Schlacht, die teilnehmenden Streitkräfte und den Operationsplan der Schlacht. Zusammenfassend hebt der Verfasser hervor, dass dies das erste Mal war, dass die italienische Armee die Streitkraft Österreich-Ungarns in einer Schlacht schlagen konnte. Die Studie hebt diejenigen italienischen taktischen Änderungen hervor, die zum Sieg der Streitkraft geführt haben.

*Cristiano Maria Dechigi*

LA BATAILLE POUR GORITZ

*Résumé*

L'auteur traite un épisode important de la participation de l'Italie à la Première Guerre mondiale : la 6ème bataille de l'Isonzo qui a eu lieu entre les armées italiennes et austro-hongroises entre les 6 et 16 août 1916. L'étude présente les idées sur la guerre du général Cadorna avant de décrire le lieu de la bataille, les forces engagées et le plan opérationnel de la bataille. En conclusion, l'auteur insiste sur le fait qu'il s'agit de la première victoire de l'armée italienne sur l'armée austro-hongroise. L'étude énumère les changements tactiques italiens qui ont conduit à la victoire.

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БОРЬБА ЗА ГОРИЦИЮ

*Резюме*

Автор анализирует один важный эпизод, шестую битву у Изонцо, с участием Италии в первой Мировой войне. В битве воевали итальянская и австро-венгерская армия с 6-ого по 16-ого августа 1916-ого года. В работе представлены общие концепции ведения войны генерала Кадорна с итальянской точки зрения, и описание места сражения вооруженных сил и оперативный план битвы. В заключении автор отмечает, что это был первый случай, когда итальянская армия победила австро-венгерскую армию в бою. В исследовании перечислены те итальянские тактические изменения, которые привели к победе армии.