Focal Point of Italian Offensive Operations

The sixty mile long valley of the Isonzo [Soca] River running from the Julian Alps south to the Adriatic Sea bisected the only practical area for offensive operations by the Italian Army during the Great War. Throughout most of the rest of the mountainous 400-mile length of the S-shaped Italian Front the dominating positions almost everywhere were in the hands of the Austro-Hungarian forces. A Delimitation Commission following the war of 1866 had intentionally given Austria a highly defensible frontier. But by attacking across the coastal plain east of the lower end of the River, they could, so judged Supreme Commander Luigi Cadorna, feasibly acquire a series of territorial objectives from Gorizia to Trieste down to the Dalmation Coast. Secondarily, further to the North...
they believed they could leap frog the mountains bracketing both sides of the River and strike a strategic blow against their opponent's rear.

The Isonzo sector, however, presented its own difficult obstacles. The river itself was susceptible to flooding and the war years featured record rainfalls and snow melts. In the more mountainous northern sector of the Front a dilemma confronted the Italian high command which they never managed to resolve: To cross the river successfully, they needed to neutralize the forces atop the overlooking mountains; but to occupy those mountains, they had to cross the river first. The lower coastal zone seemed to present more possibilities for advancing, but it featured some peculiar geography that aided defending forces.

The Carso: Typical Terrain of Lower Isonzo Sector

The British Official History of the Italian Front describes this brutal region:

East of the [Isonzo] the arid limestone uplands sloping gently westwards are deeply cut into a tangle of ridges and valleys.
Here the denuded plateaux, known to fame as the Bainsizza and the Carso, the wooded Selva di Ternova lying back between them, form enormous natural fortresses, towering 2,000 ft or more over the surrounding lowlands. The Bainsizza is described as "not flat, but traversed by ridges which rise to a considerable height above the general level" and the Carso is depicted as "a howling wilderness of stones sharp as knives." [Italian troops came to hate the barren Carso, particularly, with its relentless summer sun and crushing winter wind called the "Bora"].

These disadvantages combined with the Italian determination to achieve their expansionist war aims plus the defensive skills of General Boroevic von Baojna, Commander of the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army, would turn the Isonzo into one of the greatest killing zones of the First World War. Italy would suffer half of their 600,000 killed and Austria-Hungary would suffer 200,000 of their WWI total of 1.2 million dead along the Isonzo. Italian soldier and poet Giuseppe Ungaretti would later write: "The Isonzo scoured me like one of its stones."

**Preliminaries**

Since Italy knew war was coming, General Cadorna was able to mount a surprise opening offensive, known as *Primo Sbalzo* [the First Jump], in late May 1915 to improve his army's position in selected sectors. In Northeast Italy he ordered an advance across the 1866 border to the banks of the Isonzo. The Second Italian Army under General Frugoni captured Caporetto [Kobarid] in the north and the mighty peak of Mte Krn [Mte Nero] beyond the Isonzo. In the south the Duke of Aosta's Third Army also advanced, but were confronted by enemy units deployed across the river before Gorizia and on its surrounding mountains, thus preventing a quick capture of that key city.
Italian Troops Pose for a Photo on the Banks of the Lower Isonzo

Further south, springtime flooding around Montfalcone also hindered the advance. Attacks against Mte Krn, at the Tolmino bridgehead --- where Boroevic ordered costly counterattacks, Mte Kuk [Mte Cucco], Mte Sabatino and the Gorizia bridgehead all failed from lack of coordination and insufficient artillery support. Also, since the Austro-Hungarian Army had been at war for nearly a year, they were much more experienced at preparing defensive trenches, bunkers and barbed wire screens. General Cadorna's two armies would dig along their new line and await units still mobilizing.

The final skirmish of this preliminary phase involved a final, unsuccessful effort by the Italian Army from June 11th to the 17th to create their own bridgehead between Gorizia and Tolmino. Within a few weeks Cadorna would have 35 divisions in the sector facing the 14 divisions of their opponent's 5th Army. The First Battle of the Isonzo would begin with a week long artillery barrage from General Cadorna’s forces on May 23, 1915.

Four battles would be fought on this front in 1915, five in 1916 and two in 1917. Click on the icons below for the battles which interest you. Although some consider the the Battle of Caporetto to be the Twelveth Battle of the Isonzo, La Grande Guerra will treat it separately because of its unique character and the fact it was an offensive mounted by the Central Powers rather than Italy.
Overview

In 1915 the opposing commanders on the Isonzo Front each seemed to understand a single, but different, principle of warfare to the exclusion of all others. The Italian Comando Supremo dominated by Luigi Cadorna applied the Principle of the Offensive -- that only through offensive action can decisive results be achieved -- to all their strategy. In a half-year they would mount four major attacks against their foe.

Facing them, General Boroevic practiced the Principle of Simplicity to the maximum. His strategy was strictly defensive and he issued only one directive: "The troops should construct positions, place obstacles in front of them and remain there." Given his highly defensible position -- one requiring river crossings and assaults against high mountains by his enemy -- this approach kept the General, known to his troops as the *Croatian Thickhead*, out of trouble at first. It was, however, a tribute to the determination of the individual Italian soldier and the willingness of his leaders to spill his blood that by the end of the year, Boroевич's Fifth Army was just barely holding on to its position, requiring reinforcement by twelve divisions from other fronts.

Indeed, the Austrians also had the utter exhaustion of their adversaries to thank for surviving 1915. While Cadorna remained true to that single Principle of the Offensive, he repeatedly demonstrated ignorance of two other important, complimentary Principles:

Mass - Applying the maximum combat power at the point of decision; and
Economy - Applying the minimum essential means at points other than at the point of decision.

In 1915, the Italian commanders attacked positions up and down the sixty mile long Isonzo Front. By attacking everywhere, they were unable to concentrate 'Mass' anywhere and they physically and emotionally enervated their own forces. Their assaults were almost always uncoordinated, often piece-meal and usually mounted with inadequate artillery fire to back the infantry. Also, since the Austrians often occupied the higher positions the attacks usually failed to surprise them since they had been watching the preparations all along. As a result, in about six months Italy's Second and Third Armies would suffer 250,000 killed, wounded and captured along the Isonzo. The areas of operations shifted widely for each of the year's four major battles, but heavy casualties and a lack of notable progress characterized all of them.

First Battle of the Isonzo
June 23 - July 7, 1915

The battle began in similar fashion to the French and British attacks of early World War I on the Western Front with an inadequate, week-long artillery barrage the length of the front. Some early successes were achieved. The massif of Monte Krn [Mte Nero] was partly occupied, the heights around Plezzo in the North were captured and Mte Colowrat opposite Tolmino was also taken. However, the inability to drive the Austrians from the rest of the high ground west of Tolmino and the River would one day haunt the Italian Army as this bridgehead would be the launch pad for the catastrophic Caporetto Offensive by the Central Powers.

Between Gorizia and the sea, the Austrians withdrew to the east across the river. Gorizia itself, however, was defended on the west side of the river with Podgora and Oslavia turned into bastions and further supported by a surrounding ring of mountains, most importantly, Mte Sabatino to the north and by the Carso plateau to the south. At Podgora fighting assumed the inferno-like character of Verdun with vicious street fighting amidst artillery barrages. For a few short hours the Italian Re and Casale Brigades were able to advance far enough to look down into the streets of Goricia, but were eventually beaten back. On the Carso they gained small footholds at Adgrado and near Redipuglia and little else.

After failing to make any other significant progress, Cadorna halted. He realized his artillery was inadequate and he was further hindered by a chronic shortage of shells which was never to be resolved. Thus, besides his
own flawed strategic thinking, ordnance problems would also limit the offensive capabilities of his Armies throughout the war.

Second Battle of the Isonzo
July 18 - August 3, 1915

Fighting intensified when offensive operations resumed in July. Austro-Hungarian forces started absorbing their own heavy casualties incurring 45,000 killed and wounded in a single month. Combat at the bridgehead sectors around Plezzo and Tolmino resumed and became scenes of nearly continual struggle transcending the official dates of the Isonzo battles. The adversaries engaged in hand-to-hand combat on the plateau of Mte Krn. [See photo on 1917 page.] The battle for Podgora, front door to Goricia, was resumed with a vengeance. Eventually the town was captured by the 6th Corps of the Italian Second Army after a tremendous artillery barrage.

It was during this battle that the Carso started to gain its fearsome reputation. One Austro-Hungarian unit, the 20th Honved Division was broken losing two-thirds of its men. On July 25th, Mte San Michele [more a hill than a mountain but commanding the local terrain] became a focal point of fighting. A collection of Austrian regiments known as the Richter Group (after the Colonel commanding) would become part of the war’s mythology by mounting a suicidal counter-attack here. After three weeks, with ammunition running low, the fighting died out with little changed.
The brutality of the fighting escalated even further with the Third and Fourth Battles of the Isonzo. General Cadorna was now looking for *The Big Breakthrough*, but continuing his neglect of the Principle of Mass he committed forces the length of the Front once again. He did try to narrow his areas of attack in each region and raised his artillery count to 1,200 guns, but once again, he spread his forces too thin for what he hoped of them.

Efforts to reduce his enemy's bridgeheads at Plezzo and Tolmino were ordered leading to innumerable, but indecisive, actions in those areas. Other attacks
were mounted against Plava on the south edge of the Bainsizza Plateau. Also, the Carso heated up once more as St. Michele became the keystone to a flanking move on Gorizia. Nearby Monte Sei Busi, defended ferociously by the Austrian 106th Division, was the scene of at least four major assaults. Attacking on narrower fronts, though, meant the Austrians could focus more of their firepower over smaller sections. Boroevic also started receiving additional divisions from the Eastern and Balkan Fronts and staged some ferocious counterattacks against the Italians around Ste Michele. In early November Italy’s Comando Supremo ordered a temporary halt to reevaluate the situation.

![Italian Troops Approaching the Carso](image)

**Fourth Battle of the Isonzo**  
**November 10 - December 2, 1915**

The Fourth Battle of the Isonzo was really a second phase to the Third Battle. Fighting was more, but not exclusively, concentrated around Gorizia and on the Carso. In the first case, the Second Army mounted its greatest assault capturing Oslavia, but with not quite enough momentum left to gain Gorizia. South down to the Adriatic, the Third Army simply accumulated more and more casualties. Typical, was the fighting around Mte Sei Busi where five more assaults were mounted by the Italian Army. Towards the end of the Fourth Battle, action heated up again up and down the Isonzo Front from Tolmino down to Mte San Michele reaching a peak at the end of November. From the 1st of December to mid-month action shifted from major frontal assaults to small local actions. Halting for the winter, the troops on the Carso would learn they had achieved little since June except exchanging the pounding sun of the summer for a crushing northern winter wind off of the Alps know as the *Bora.*
Overview

*If the campaign is protracted, the resources of the State will not be equal to the strain. . . then no man, however wise, will be able to avert the consequences that must ensue.*

---

Sun Tsu - *The Art of War*

When Italy entered the Great War in 1915, it had hoped to tilt the balance of force against the Central Powers, ending the war quickly and allowing them to gain some long sought after territorial gains on the cheap. By the start of 1916, however, they found they were engaged in a protracted *Total War* placing undreamed of social and economic strains on the nation. Italy’s government and military had to justify this burden with some successes on the battlefield. Their new allies had also started placing demands on them to continue on the offensive to alleviate pressures on their fronts. Austria-Hungary, likewise, had mobilized its entire dual-empire to support its war effort and needed to keep popular support. Also, to inhibit the disintegration threatened by the growth of ethnocentric nationalism, they could not afford to surrender any territory. On the Isonzo, all of this meant that in 1916 Italy needed to continue attacking and Austria-Hungary needed to continue defending. The war of attrition would continue growing with both sides blind to the inevitable consequences.
Fifth Battle of the Isonzo
March 9 - 17, 1916

In February of 1916, the German Army on the Western Front launched a tremendous assault on the city of Verdun and its surrounding fortress zone in northeast France. At a conference at Chantilly, France Marshal Joffre requested that Italy and Russia take the offensive on their respective fronts to reduce pressure on the French forces. Cadorna ordered a broad, but half-hearted, offensive nearly immediately.

Probes were made at Tolmino, Gorizia and the Carso. In most cases they were more demonstrations than full assaults. These died out after about a week because of bad weather and some bracing counterattacks staged by the Austrians, most notably at Santa Maria near Tolmino. The Italian Army also still needed more guns and artillery shells. The allies committed to sending Italy heavy artillery pieces; and further offensives were delayed until the new weapons and sufficient shells could be assembled.

Meanwhile, in the Trentino, the Austrians were marshalling their own forces for an assault. If they could mount a successful attack down off of the mountains, cross the Asiago Plateau, then occupy the Venetian Plain, they could cut-off all the Italian forces in the Carnic and Julian Alps and along the Isonzo. This major operation, called the Battle of Asiago by most and the Straffe [Punishment] Expedition by some began on May 15, 1916. Asiago will be the subject of another major article on La Grande Guerra and will not be discussed here in detail. It did, however, have some dramatic effects on the Isonzo Front and these need to be outlined briefly.
At first the Austrian attack in the Trentino looked dramatically successful. Comando Supremo delayed further its plans for offensive operations and moved troops to reduce the threat to their rear. The deployment from the Isonzo to the Asiago Plateau was done fairly quickly since the Italian forces were travelling over shorter, interior lines. By early June the Austrian offensive was grinding to a halt. The Italian situation was further helped by the Russian response to their call for pressure on the Austrian Army on the Eastern Front. The subsequent series of actions known as the Brusilov Offensive were so successful that Austrian Supreme Commander Conrad von Hotzendorf was forced to give up his Trentino Offensive and move troops to distant Galicia. Italy’s responded in turn by mounting a counter-offensive which ultimately regained part of the Asiago Plateau.

Back on the Isonzo Front, General Boroevic had decided to strengthen some local positions and the Italian Third was directed to mount attacks to discourage the Austrians shifting more men to the Trentino. Italian operations at Monfalcone were fairly low-scale, but the concurrent Austrian attack on the Carso marked a turning point for the Great War on the Italian Front. In their assaults on the Italian IX Corps at Mte San Michele and San Martino they introduced gases of the asphyxiant type leading to some quick local successes with heavy losses casualties amongst their opponents. The Italian killed, wounded and gassed totaled 4,600 men in just a few days.
As the Italian counteroffensive on the Trentino slowed, the focus of Comando Supremo shifted back to the Isonzo. Now, they decided, the time was at hand to capture strategic Gorizia. Again, they used their shorter interior lines to shift troops, this time back to the Isonzo sector. In August they would be ready to mount what would turn out to be the most successful of their eleven Isonzo Offensives.

**Gorizia, Looking North to Monte Sabatino**

**Sixth Battle of the Isonzo**  
**August 4 - 17, 1916**

The Sixth Battle of the Isonzo is also known as the Battle of Gorizia after Italy’s sole objective for the operation. For once, by practicing the Principle of Mass or Concentration and limiting the initial battlefield to an eight-mile wide front, General Cadorna was able to align 10 of his divisions against only 2 of his enemy's. This was made possible by the secrecy surrounding the preparations and his speed in switching back units from the Asiago sector.

The battle began with what was intended to be a diversionary artillery barrage and an infantry feint by units of two corps against Monfalcone to the south. The fighting got out of control, though, resulting in over five days of tough combat. The diversion failed to draw any Austrian units around Gorizia south.

The main advance began two days later from the towns of Oslavia and Padgora and featured the capture of Mte Sabatino and Mte Padgora despite strong resistance and heavy counterattacks. On August 8th, units of the 12th Italian Division were the first to enter Gorizia. The next day the Isonzo was crossed in force and the city secured. On the southern perimeter, the front broadened, growing to a width of fifteen miles. The
fierce fighting characteristic of the Carso was once again renewed. Mte San Michele and Mte Sei Busi were finally seized, but at tremendous loss of life. The Italian advance on the Carso continued several miles to the dry river bed of the Vallone.

General Cadorna turned a bit cautious and Boroevic brought up reinforcements who dug-in at strong locations, and the operation ended fairly quickly. The advance of 3 miles depth over the 15-mile front with the capture of several strategic targets was the first major offensive success by the Italian Army during the Great War. Italian morale temporarily soared and on August 29th the government finally declared war on Germany. For their gains, the Italian Army had suffered 50,000 killed and wounded; on the defense, Austria-Hungary lost 42,000. Planning was initiated by Comando Supremo to expand the Gorizia bridgehead as soon as sufficient ordnance could be collected.

Exhausted Troops of the Firenze Brigade

**Seventh Battle of the Isonzo**  
September 14 - 17, 1916

**Eighth Battle of the Isonzo**  
October 10 - 12, 1916

**Ninth Battle of the Isonzo**  
November 1 - 4, 1916

The next three battles on the Isonzo, all designed to expand the Gorizia bridgehead, were brief and bloody. Tactically, they featured sharp, uncoordinated local attacks on Austro-Hungarian positions which achieved some progress, but which, as usual, inflicted worse casualties the attackers [75,000] than the defenders [63,000]. These three grim
battles probably started the downward spiral of morale in the Italian Army that would culminate a year later in the disaster of Caporetto.

The Second Army was given the objective of the Selva di Terranova, a wooded area lying back from the river in the gap between the Bainsizza Plateau in the north and the Carso to the south. During the Seventh Battle they captured Mte Rombon, but were forced to withdraw. Heavy losses by both armies then caused Cadorna to suspend offensive operations until October. Second Army's biggest success would take place in November when they captured Hill 171 near Mte St Marco behind Gorizia.

Third Army was ordered to advance once again through the Carso pushing the front six miles east. They faced tremendously determined opposition and after advancing nearly a mile in September, their high casualty rate necessitated a halt. The next month their advance was minimal. In early November they drove another mile close to the village of Castagnevizza where the front stabilized as winter approached. By the end of 1916 all the combatants along the Isonzo knew they were trapped in an inescapable war of attrition. Few, though, probably foresaw that even worse was coming in 1917.
Overview

In war, moral considerations make up three-quarters of the game; the relative balance of manpower accounts only for the remaining quarter.

Napoleon Bonaparte

In October of 1917 the most famous battle of the Great War on the Italian Front, Caporetto -- fought along the Isonzo -- would result in near catastrophe for Italy. The joint German and Austro-Hungarian assault would break open the Isonzo line, destroy the Italian Second Army and remove 275,000 Italian soldiers, almost all of them as captives, from the battlefield. In that battle there were many tactical shortcomings demonstrated by Cadorna and his subordiantes and the Central Powers successfully applied the new "Hutier" or shock tactics. These matters will be discussed in La Grande Guerra’s article on Caporetto -- but, when entire battalions surrender without fully engaging their opponents, relative skills in the arts of generalship seem inadequate to explain things. A clue as to what must have happened at Caporetto was given a century earlier by [coincidentally] a prior veteran of the Isonzo sector, Napoleon Bonaparte. As quoted above, he identified moral considerations as the major determinant in warfare.

By October 1917, the moral and psychological well being -- the morale -- of the Italian troops on the Isonzo had reached bottom. Certainly,
pacifistic and defeatist propaganda from within Italy combining with the
Pope’s call for the war to end contributed to this. It must have seemed to
the mostly Catholic Italian soldiery that everyone but their generals
thought the war was a bad idea. Additionally, the brutal treatment they
received from the high command ranging from frequent executions to a
policy of minimal leave time furthered the sense of oppression. Also, as
pointed out by historian Luigi Villari, there was a problem of isolation
primarily amongst the troops of the Second Army assigned to high
mountain posts. He wrote, "These positions were usually on the rougher
mountain areas, dominated by an invisible enemy, where. . .Headquarters
were unavoidably far from the front line, out of touch with the troops."

But, as far as we can tell from firsthand accounts, it was, most concretely,
the endless and apparently pointless war of attrition on the Isonzo that
magnified the psychological toll. And, if the first nine battles of the Isonzo
had pushed morale downward, the offensives of Spring and Summer 1917
shoved it off of a cliff. In raw life and death terms, the survivors of the nine
offensives waged through the end of 1916 had seen about 70,000 of their
comrades killed. In the two offensives of 1917 they would see 76,000 more
die. This accelerating rate of loss must have compounded the doubts and
stresses felt by men already trapped in an endless war of annihilation. The
Tenth and Eleventh Isonzo Battles of 1917, therefore, are keys to
understanding the collapse of the Italian army that followed at Caporetto.

Mte Krn [Mte Nero] with Caporetto [Kobarid] in Foreground

Tenth Battle of the Isonzo
May 12 - June 8, 1917

By 1917 Italy had agreed to coordinate its operations with its allies. Spring
of that year was to be the occasion of a decisive breakthrough on the
Western Front to be led by French general Robert Nivelle. Italy, therefore, also had to plan for a decisive breakthrough in its only feasible area for offensive operations, the Isonzo. The usual priority, expansion of the Gorizia corridor for a further push to Trieste, was this time turned into a diversionary part of a broader attack. For mysterious reasons, in early 1917 Comando Supremo seemed bent on capturing as many mountains as possible. Moving from North to South, they engaged in an indecisive war of mines for control of Mte Krn's peak east of Caporetto. The largest assault [sound in its thinking, but weak in execution] on the Tolmino bridgehead began on May 15th and failed. Mte Kuk and Mte Vodice near Plava were successfully captured, but Mte Santo across the river from Mte Sabatino was not.

As the main battles in the north staggered to conclusion, Third Army was ordered to attack again on the Carso. After some initial progress, they reached the outskirts of Mte Hermada in the last days of May, but eventually were halted by stiff Austrian counterattacks on June 6-8. Units of the Catanzaro Brigade refused to advance in a last futile attack on Mte Hermada and were subsequently formally decimated as punishment in July. After taking 157,000 casualties [killed, wounded and captured] it was time for General Cadorna to adjourn the blood letting.

Bridgehead at Tolmino
Austrian Forces Occupied Both Sides of River

Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo
August 19 - September 12, 1917

Unable to clear the Austrian 5th Army off the dangerous Tolmino Bridgehead, Comando Supremo developed a plan for both flanking that position and threatening the enemy's rear marshalling areas, possibly
even gaining another route to ever-elusive Trieste. The objective was to capture the Bainsizza Plateau southeast of Tolmino. Unfortunately the planners combined this somewhat creative solution with the old standby of scheme for capturing Trieste by just pounding very, very hard through the Carso. Guided by this two-pronged strategy, Italy’s Second and Third Armies began the largest of all the Isonzo Offensives on August 19, 1917.

In both areas the attackers suffered from the same handicap. The Bainsizza and Carso are, as described in our Isonzo Background article, "enormous natural fortresses". The new target for 1917, the Bainsizza, rises so rapidly and so high from the Isonzo that a frontal assault would be nearly suicidal. For once, however, tactics were adjusted to the situation. In another admirable bit of creativity it was decided that the plateau, with the help of fourteen bridges to be placed across the river by engineers, would be assaulted from the north at a section where the terrain was not as challenging for assault troops. Despite heavy casualties the men of the 24th Corps crossed the river, advanced behind an effective artillery barrage, forced their adversaries to withdraw and eventually occupied about half of the plateau.

On the Move in the Isonzo Sector

On the south edge of the plateau a secondary attack was staged from Mte Kuk resulting in the capture of Mte Santo which had resisted in the 10th Battle. These advances around the plateau stopped when the artillery support was not able to follow further and the Austro-Hungarian forces, always good on the defense, started taking advantage of the many caverns and hiding places provided by the Bainsizza’s weird geology. Nevertheless, after the success of the 6th Battle of the Isonzo when Gorizia was captured, this effort was the most impressive military achievement by the Italian Army on the Isonzo.
Elsewhere, it was the same old story of frontal assaults on well developed defensive positions. After a final, inadequate attempt to capture Mte Gabriele which had been fortified with galleries and dugouts for years, the offensive ceased. Something was in the air. Cadorna sensed the Germans were about intervene and he wanted to get ready.

His preparations were to prove thoroughly inadequate, but that is a story to be told elsewhere. With the end of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo one of the sadder chapters in humanity's annals concludes. There were other dreadful battlefields in the Great War Verdun, the Somme, Ypres, Gallipoli where multiple battles were fought, but only on the Isonzo was the same futility engaged in **ELEVEN** times.

**Sources and Thanks:** A number of works were consulted for this article including:


Photos were kindly provided by Ray Mentzer, Mike Iavorone and Alessandro Risso.