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MWP 2017/14
Max Weber Programme

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Point in Italy's War.

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EUI Working Paper **MWP** 2017/14

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ISSN 1830-7728

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Printed in Italy
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
www.eui.eu
cadmus.eui.eu

Abstract

The battle of Gorizia, also known as the sixth battle of the Isonzo, was fought on 2-17 August 1916. The Italian Chief of Staff, Luigi Cadorna, managed to conquer (or “liberate”, according to the Italian narration of Italy’s participation to the Great War) the first city in Austro-Hungarian territory. It proved a turning point in Italy’s war, for it boosted Italian morale – shaken by earlier bloody failures – and revalidated the war amongst the Italian public. It also strengthened Italy’s reputation vis a vis its allies of the Triple Entente – Britain, France and Russia – largely disappointed, up to that moment, with Italy’s contribution to the common cause; as a result, Cadorna’s victory paved the way for more effective inter-allied co-operation. However, it proved the single noteworthy success of the Isonzo campaign. This essay analyses the peculiarities of the battle of Gorizia, focusing on how victory was possible, and how it contributed to re-shape the Italian participation to the First World War.

Keywords

First World War; Italy; Italian Front; Trench Warfare; Inter-allied Relations.

This paper was presented at the Colloque International “Les Batailles de 1916”, Paris, 22-24 June 2016.

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Italy's War Prior to Gorizia

When Italy joined the Entente on 23 May 1915 its war aims were considerably different from those of its new allies France, Britain, and Russia. Its main goal was the reunification of the “unredeemed lands”: Italian territories under Hapsburg rule, in particular the provinces of Trento and Trieste, which included the city of Gorizia (Görz). In consequence, Italy's main enemy was Austria-Hungary, while that of the other Entente powers was Germany. Through 1915-1916 the main diplomatic goal of Britain, France and Russia was to involve Italy increasingly in the wider war of the Entente. Yet, Rome delayed its declaration of war on the Ottoman empire until August 1915, and resisted pressure to declare war on Germany. This badly affected allied strategy as it made military co-ordination very difficult. The other allies retaliated by excluding Italy from their secret talks over the post-war settlement in Asia Minor.

Italy's position was further complicated by the fact that almost all of the belligerents presented the conflict as a “defensive war”, thereby cementing the home front. The Italians, on the other hand, considered it an offensive war, indeed in many ways a “war of conquest”, but after a year there were no victories to celebrate. The battle of Gorizia (sixth battle of the Isonzo) marked a turning point in Italy's war, for both military and political reasons. It was the first real Italian victory of the war and it resulted from a combination of military factors. To better understand its peculiarities, I will begin with a brief review of Italy's first year of war.

In the mind of the Italian Chief of Staff, Luigi Cadorna, the Italian army was to take up a defensive stance in the Trentino, launching its offensive across the river Isonzo, which snaked down to the Adriatic sea in the east, in two main directions: from the Cadore and from the Carnia.¹ The main attack fell to the left wing (2nd Army), its goals being Ljubljana and later Vienna, with Trieste as a secondary objective to be reached by the right wing (3rd Army).² But the Italian government ordered general mobilisation very late in April, so the army was still being assembled at the frontier when Italy declared war.³ Cadorna could launch the first battle of the Isonzo only on 23 June. The Austrians were quick to raise the number of their divisions in Italy from 15 to 22 and thus halted the Italian advance.

Cadorna's first five offensives had a similar outcome. The Italians faced battle-hardened Austro-Hungarian veterans commanded by General Svetozar Boroëvić, in their well-prepared defenses on the chain of mountains over the Isonzo. Cadorna's goal was ambitious: to achieve a general breakthrough and head for Vienna. He attacked on a broad front, thus nullifying his numerical superiority. The movement of his reserves was too slow to be effective, and he badly lacked heavy artillery and munitions. Furthermore, the artillery fire, far from being focused on key sectors, was dispersed along the whole front.⁴ Yet the war of attrition in the mountains was as costly for the attacker as it was for the defender. As Colonel Georg Veith wrote: “The Italians did not speak of a promenade to Vienna anymore, but for the Austrians the Isonzo had also become [...] a Hell: for anyone who had fought once on the Isonzo, any other theatre of war was deprived of its horror”.⁵

To release pressure from Boroëvić, General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Austrian Chief of Staff, planned the so-called *Strafexpedition* in the Trentino. His goal was to break the Italian front at its weakest point, reaching the Venetian plains and trapping the bulk of the Italian army engaged on the Isonzo. On 15 May 1916, 14 Austro-Hungarian divisions, in part dispatched from the Isonzo and supported by 1,200 guns, attacked by surprise. At the beginning, the offensive seemed unstoppable. The Italians were outgunned 10:1, but they followed Cadorna's orders to defend every inch of terrain,

¹ F. Cappellano, *Piani di Guerra dello Stato Maggiore Italiano contro l'Austria-Ungheria (1961-1915)* (Venice: Rossato ed., 2014), p. 110.

² *Ibid.* pp. 144-145.

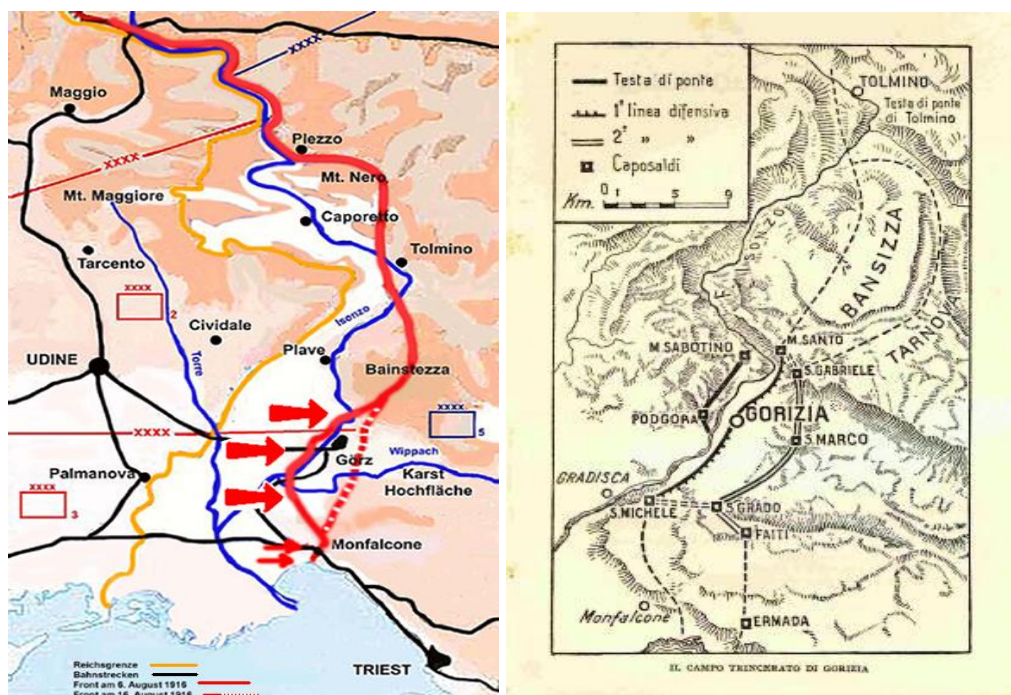
³ P. Pieri, *L'Italia nella Prima Guerra Mondiale (1915-1916)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), p. 78.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 85-86.

⁵ Quoted by *ibid.* p. 88.

mounting desperate counter-attacks to regain lost ground. Their losses amounted to 76,000 men, as opposed to 30,000 Austrians, but they eventually managed to halt the enemy. Cadorna formed a new reserve army, gathering troops from the Isonzo, 10 divisions in total, and counter-attacked *en masse* on 16 June – another 70,000 Italians and 53,000 Austrians were lost.⁶ In the meantime, the Brusilov offensive had started in Galicia on 4 June. The Russians had scheduled this operation for July, but they accelerated the offensive so as to release pressure from their Italian ally in the Trentino. Consequently, Brusilov's attack is generally given credit for relieving the Italians in 1916, although the *Strafexpedition* had already failed to break through the Altipiani on 1-3 June.⁷ The unexpected Russian success nevertheless forced the Austro-Hungarian command to send reinforcements to the eastern front, thus weakening both the Trentino and the Isonzo.

Despite the Italian resistance in the Trentino, the Italian hopes for a quick and successful “war of conquest” lay in tatters. Popular support for the war cooled. The military emergency also triggered a political crisis in Rome: the Prime Minister, Antonio Salandra, resigned and was replaced by Paolo Boselli, who set up a “national government” along the lines of the French *Union Sacrée*.⁸ Cadorna himself feared he would be replaced. Now he needed a clear victory to strengthen his own position.



The Italian front in 1916 and the Gorizia sector

Preparation

In early spring, before the Austrians temporarily took the initiative away from him, Cadorna had begun to plan an offensive against the city of Gorizia, which formed a salient in the Isonzo front. Its defences amounted to four natural bulwarks: Monte Sabotino and the Podgora on the western bank of the river; Monte San Gabriele and Monte San Marco on the eastern. Monte San Michele dominated the Isonzo before Gradisca further south, and was yet another major obstacle obstructing the way to Gorizia.⁹

⁶ M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat, *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), p. 194.

⁷ Pieri, *L'Italia...*, p. 101-103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112; A. Sema, *La Grande guerra sul fronte dell'Isonzo*, 3 vols. (Gorizia: Editrice goriziana, 1995-1997), I, pp. 128 ff.

Cadorna's original ambitions had taken such a bruising that he set more modest goals for the next offensive. He told the Duke of Aosta, commander of the 3rd Army, that he aimed to take "firm possession of the threshold of Gorizia" by removing at least one of the western bulwarks as a preliminary step to a larger offensive on the city.¹⁰ The task of getting a foothold on the eastern bank of the Isonzo, on the skirt of land between the river and the city, fell to the VI Corps under General Luigi Capello (2nd Army).¹¹ The most aggressive of Cadorna's commanders, Capello was more ambitious: he expected to be on the Isonzo in four hours, and "beyond Gorizia" in four days. However, Cadorna and Aosta agreed that only small bridgeheads on the eastern bank were in view.¹²

The heavy losses suffered until then stimulated a revision in the Italian military approach. Cadorna did everything he could to achieve strategic surprise. He had in mind "a manoeuvre on interior lines in the modern manner"¹³, to transfer 13 divisions from the Trentino back to the Isonzo undetected. He made efficient use of railways to quickly ferry over 200,000 men to the area between 27 July and 4 August, while he remained in the Trentino to conceal his intentions. Cadorna's design for the battle comprised two attacks. Capello's VI Corps with six divisions would launch the main assault on Sabotino and Podgora, while the XI Corps under General Giorgio Cigliana, with 3 divisions, carried out a secondary action against San Michele; four divisions were put in reserve, three behind the XI Corps, one behind the VI.¹⁴

The main Italian innovation at Gorizia was accurate preparation. The offensive was planned in detail, taking advantage of lessons learned, to avoid a traditional frontal assault by optimising human and technological resources. For the first time, the Italians had concentrated a large mass of artillery in a small area: 1,200 guns – 400 of them large-calibre – and 800 new heavy trench mortars or *bombarde*. About 920 of these were placed within an area of 8 kilometres from where the main attack was to be launched.¹⁵ Increasing the number of cannons, however, was not enough: it was necessary to maximise their use. "Only by raising to a very high level the tonnage of projectiles thrown at the enemy is it possible to overcome defences prepared at length and carefully", Cadorna told Aosta.¹⁶ Yet his conception of artillery doctrine had serious limitations. His main recommendation was that the guns should be brought into action simultaneously and by surprise. But he did not see counter-battery fire as a priority: artillery duties included demolition of the obstacles blocking the advance of the infantry, so that it would be exposed to enemy fire for as short a time as possible, blocking the arrival of reinforcements and jamming the enemy's main centres and arteries.¹⁷

Limitations in the artillery doctrine were compensated for by hard field work made by the engineers and the infantry, in particular on Monte Sabotino. Since spring, units of the 4th Division had exploded 2,500 mines per day, excavating an intricate grid of trenches, tunnels, and caverns in the limestone, often by night, sapping up the western flank of the mountain until the front lines were as close as 30 meters to enemy trenches.¹⁸ The work was carried out under the supervision of an emerging officer, Colonel Pietro Badoglio, and was "a classic example of field fortification and of the offensive preparation of terrain".¹⁹ The result was the first significant improvement in the design, construction, and use of Italian trenches since the war had begun. Where previously they had been too wide, too shallow, and very visible because they were covered with sheets of metal and wood,

¹⁰ L. Cadorna, *La guerra alla fronte italiana* (Milan: Treves, 1934), pp. 264-268.

¹¹ M. Thompson, *The White War. Life and Death on the Italian Front* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 169.

¹² J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 182.

¹³ Cadorna, *Lettere famigliari*, Raffaele Cadorna ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), Cadorna to Raffaele Cadorna, 30 June 1916, p. 157.

¹⁴ Gooch., *Italian Army...*, p. 183; Pieri, *L'Italia...*, p. 113.

¹⁵ F. Frizzera, "1914-1918 online": http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/gorizia_battle_of

¹⁶ Quoted by G. Rocca, *Cadorna*, (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), pp. 159-160.

¹⁷ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 183.

¹⁸ Thompson, *White War...*, p. 170.

¹⁹ See: F. Zingales, *La conquista di Gorizia* (Rome: Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 1925).

Badoglio designed covered walkways, underground caverns and shelters constructed to lessen losses; cable cars (*teleferiche*) were installed to bring in supplies and ammunition; stone was quarried and brought forward to build walls that would form the besiegers' parapets, and a more active surveillance of no-man's land was encouraged.²⁰

On 5 August the Italians were ready. The Austro-Hungarians could only manage eight divisions (most of them incomplete) supported by 640 guns and 333 trench mortars. They had underestimated the Italians' capacity to mount a new offensive after two months of bitter fighting.²¹ At 06:15 hours on 6 August the Italian artillery opened up.

The Battle and its Results

The attack covered a front 35 kilometres in length. In thirteen days the Italian artillery fired 535,000 rounds, an average of 41,153 per day.²² The Austrian lines were shrouded in smoke, their command centres disabled, many observation posts destroyed, and communications wrecked. Recognising that progress had been made in the first days or even hours, Cadorna curtailed the preparatory bombardment.²³ At 16:00 the first wave of infantry scrambled out of the trenches. Their instructions were not to stop in captured positions, but to keep pushing forward as far as possible. Helmets had been distributed for the first time, the soldiers wore white discs on their backs so that the artillery could spot them, and projectiles containing gas were used intensively for the first time on both sides.²⁴ Thus the battle experience for the Italians was in some ways a first.

The attackers were at the enemy's front lines before its forces had recovered from the bombardment, which was an unexpected feat for the Italians. The Sabotino – insuperable for so long – fell in 38 minutes.²⁵ The Italians also captured Oslavia, Grafenberg and Monte Calvario, along with 8,000 prisoners of war. With Sabotino lost, the 15-kilometre line around Gorizia began to crumble. Most of Podgora hill was overrun. The attack was then extended to Monte San Michele: as on Sabotino, the “methodical advance” was conducted diligently until no-man's land was only some 50 meters wide. Though suffering heavy losses, the Italians took the summit of San Martino hamlet.²⁶ Boroëvić was startled by the speed of their progress. He prevented a general breakthrough by mounting counter-attacks during the night. These were repulsed all along the line, but managed to halt the Italian advance.

Next day, encouraged by his early success, Cadorna extended his design: Monte Santo, San Gabriele and the heights east of Gorizia were to be taken as soon as the troops were reorganised. He also ordered the 2nd Army to attack Monte Kuk and Monte Vodice from Plava in order to turn the Austrian positions from the north. The Italians also achieved some success in their attack along the coast. They forced the Austrians out of their line between Monfalcone and Doberdò and conquered the main transport road leading from the coast town of Duino to Gorizia, thus securing their advance to the city from the south. By 8 August they had cleared the west bank of the middle Isonzo. A bridgehead was finally established across the river. That night, Boroëvić sent his last reserves into the cauldron. When these were repulsed he realised that Gorizia could not be defended, and he ordered the withdrawal of the 58th, 17th and 20th Divisions to the second line of defence, about 5 kilometres to the

²⁰ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 182.

²¹ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, p. 195.

²² Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 183.

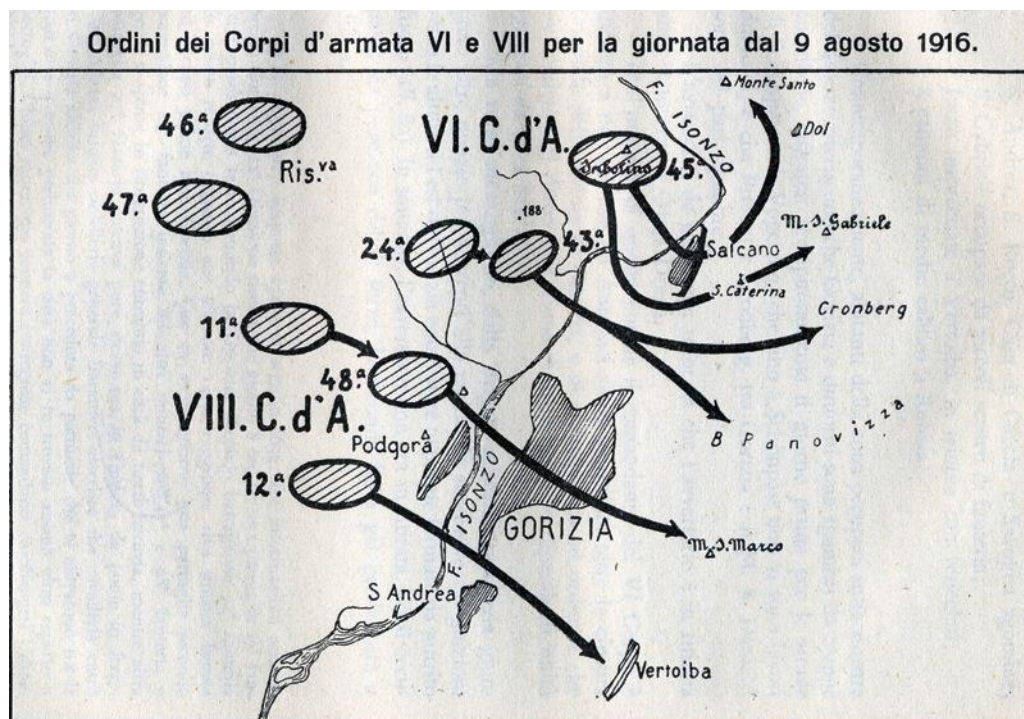
²³ Thompson, *White War...*, 170.

²⁴ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 183. The Austro-Hungarians had tested gas projectiles a few weeks earlier (29 June) in a minor action on Monte San Michele. It had been a “light and shade” experiment, because the wind changed unexpectedly at some point and caused the gas to hit Austro-Hungarian positions. The Italians nevertheless had been astonished by the new weapon, and had contained the attack with difficulty, with the loss of 7,000 men as compared to 2,000 Austrians.

²⁵ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, p. 197.

²⁶ Thompson, *White War...*, 172.

east beyond the Isonzo. Only 5,000 out of 18,000 defenders of Gorizia managed to escape.²⁷ On 9 August the Italians entered the city.



Cadorna's instructions to the VI and VIII Corps to exploit the breakthrough (9 August)

From 10 to 16 August, Cadorna tried to transform this local advance into a strategic success. He now pushed his army well beyond his original plan: he urged Capello to reach Aidussina, across the Vipacco valley (known as the Vallone), but Capello would have needed cavalry units and reserves to do so. At a summit meeting of commanders at Brazzano on 11 August, Aosta tried to get Cadorna to redirect his offensive onto the Carso towards Hermada and then Trieste, but the Generalissimo stuck to his earlier orders to attack San Gabriele and Monte Santo to open the path to the Ternova plateau and thence to Ljubljana.²⁸

In the meantime, Boroëvić had transferred his artillery to new positions on Monte Santo, San Gabriele and San Marco,²⁹ which formed a barrier “even more imposing” than the old one. Cadorna ordered an immediate attack across the Vallone, before the enemy could strengthen its new positions. But the Italian artillery lagged behind and the men were weary. Furthermore, Austro-Hungarian reinforcements were on their way from the Trentino: the Italian advance was stemmed on 12 August. After a two-day pause, the Italians attacked again for three days “in a reversion of the old futile pattern”, until Cadorna called a halt on 17 August.³⁰

The Austrians had lost an important bridgehead and a dominant position on the Isonzo. But Cadorna's finest victory confirmed his limitations. He had succeeded in moving forward 5 kilometres along a 20-kilometre front but had not prepared plans to exploit a potential breakthrough; by the time he awoke to the opportunity, fresh troops, cavalry and munitions could not be brought up in sufficient strength to attack the second line before it was reinforced by Austro-Hungarian reserves. What lay ahead was another chain of mountains, and it was necessary to start all over again.

²⁷ Pieri, *L'Italia...*, p. 114.

²⁸ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 184.

²⁹ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, p. 198.

³⁰ Thompson, *White War...*, 176.

Casualties remained high as at earlier Isonzo battles: 51,232 Italians, amongst them 12,128 missing, 49,035 Austrians including 20,000 prisoners of war, and “the rich booty taken between the beginning of August and December”.³¹ In Cadorna’s mind Gorizia revalidated the idea of a *decisive battle*. The Generalissimo called it “a model breakthrough”,³² and it marked a change in his offensive approach. Henceforth he switched tactics from broadly based diversionary attacks spread along the Isonzo to short, sharp initiatives tightly focused upon a single objective. As it turned out, these proved no more decisive than his earlier strategy.

Therefore, the conquest of Gorizia did not change much strategically. But psychologically and politically it did. The Italian press placed a great stress on it: after fifteen centuries “a wholly Italian army had defeated a great foreign army”.³³ In a wider perspective, the battle can be read as a turning point in the Italian war narrative. The Italian home front had been looking for victories and heroes to give credence to the idea of a “war of conquest”. Italian propaganda found in Enrico Toti (1882-1916), a volunteer killed on 6 August, a hero to glorify. Therefore, the “liberation of Gorizia” became part of Italy’s representation of its participation in the Great War.³⁴

In the wake of the victory, the Rome government felt strong enough to declare war on Germany on 28 August, thus going beyond the national dimension of its war and embracing the Entente’s war. This marked a substantial change in inter-allied relations. It strengthened allied co-operation and melted tensions and mutual recrimination. It made it possible to establish a common anti-submarine strategy in the Mediterranean and it encouraged new inter-allied talks on Asia Minor.

Conclusions

Gorizia was the only victory achieved through manoeuvre on the Italian front in World War I. Cadorna’s use of interior lines to gather his divisions on the Isonzo after the Trentino offensive caught the enemy by surprise. Politically, his victory marked a turning point in Italy’s war, for it thoroughly altered its initial commitment. The conquest of the first enemy city boosted Italian morale and revalidated the war. It strengthened the reputation of Italy and paved the way for more effective inter-allied co-operation. It also strengthened the Entente’s confidence at a crucial moment in the war, when they desperately needed a victory. Tactically, it showed that the Italian army was learning from its bloody failures of 1915: improvements were made in the use of terrain, in the use of artillery and in co-ordinating the attacks; the number of guns and machine-guns was increased and new tools were used, from helmets to projectiles containing gas.

After Gorizia, Cadorna turned his attention to the Carso. Three successive offensives (*spallate*) between October and November were brought to a halt by a combination of heavy enemy gunfire and bad weather. Together they cost the Italians 125,000 dead and wounded, as opposed to 85,000 Austrians.³⁵ As Cadorna himself admitted in irritation to his son, “the Italians do not have the patience of the Germans” in planning their offensives in detail:³⁶ a curious criticism on the part of the man who was supposed to make the plans. Hence the sixth battle proved the single noteworthy success of the Isonzo campaign. The circumstances that had made it possible – above all strategic surprise, detailed logistical planning and brilliantly implemented tactical co-ordination – would not materialise again.

³¹ “Official report by Commander-in-Chief Luigi Cadorna, 26 December 1916”, quoted by: C.F. Horne ed., *Source Records of the Great War*, 7 vols., vol. IV (New York: National Alumni, 1923): http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:3171/Documents/Details/Source_Records_Volume_IV

³² Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 185.

³³ Pieri, *L'Italia...*, p. 117.

³⁴ Frizzera, “1914-1918 online”, *cit.*

³⁵ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, p. 186.

³⁶ Cadorna, *Lettere famigliari...*, Cadorna to Raffaele Cadorna, 11 October 1916, pp. 171-2.

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