

## ITALIAN FRONT, 1915-18

### A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

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#### GENERAL SOURCES

While publically recognizing the Triple Alliance since 1882, Italy chose a path of neutrality when war erupted over the “damn foolish thing in the Balkans” (as had been ominously forecast by Otto von Bismarck). Lacking confidence that Austria-Hungary would support Italian territorial desires (Trieste, Zara, and Dalmatia, to name a few), the Italian government secretly negotiated treaties with both France and Great Britain that virtually nullified its Alliance agreement. Citing Austrian aggression in the Balkans, Italy declared its neutrality on 3 Aug 1914, and entered into negotiations with Entente powers, who offered more visible support of Italian territorial expansion. In April 1915, she joined the Entente and on 3 May officially rejected the Triple Alliance.

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## **ISONZO**

The Italian government declared war on Austria-Hungary on 23 May 1915 and on Germany fifteen months later with no clear consensus of either its population or elected officials. Although she possessed an army of 875,000 men, superior to that of Austria-Hungary, the front with Austria crossed unforgiving terrain from the Alps to the Adriatic. Italian Commander in Chief, General Luigi Cadorno, was a staunch proponent of the frontal assault, and once Italy entered the war, he focused on defeating the enemy along the Isonzo Front. Four major assaults were launched in 1915 (followed by five in 1916 and three in 1917), across the rocky, glacial Alpine landscape in high altitudes. The 1915 Battles of the Isonzo resulted in over 117,000 Italian and over 70,000 Austro-Hungarian casualties, but the front did not change from its prewar status. Despite more fighting, the stalemate lasted through all of 1916.

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The Austro-Hungarian Commander, Field Marshal Conrad was equally obsessed with the Isonzo Line, and he counter attacked between the costly Italian attempts to break the Austrian front. The May 1916 Trentino Offensive, and subsequent Battle of Asiago was an attempt to move through the Trentino behind the Italians on the Isonzo Front. Cadorna was able to dispatch about half a million men from the Isonzo, and contain the Austrians (who were further weakened by loss of troops transferred to the Eastern Front in response to the Brusilov Offensive), winning the battle of Gorizia in Aug 1916. Cadorna launched three more inconclusive offensives through the late summer and autumn of 1916.

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### CAPORETTO

By early 1917, Cadorna became convinced that he needed Allied assistance with his relentless pursuit on the Isonzo Front, but British and French offers of assistance were guarded. Plans were devised to transport troops only in case of an emergency in return for Cadorna continuing the operation. The Tenth battle took place in the spring, the Eleventh in the summer.

The Twelfth, and final, Battle of the Isonzo, came where Cadorna was least expecting. By October, he finally suspected massive Austrian troop concentrations in the rugged mountainous terrain around Caporetto (modern-day Kobarid, in the upper Isonzo Valley), and ordered his forces to adopt a defensive posture. Italian Second Army commander, General Luigi Capello, both ignored orders to prepare defenses and underestimated enemy strength. His front disintegrated in the face of massive Austro-German assaults beginning 24 Oct. Cadorna ordered a retreat to the Tagliamento River, which was completed by the end of October. Austro-German forces outran their lines of supply, attacking one more time at Corino on 2 Nov, forcing Cadorna to withdraw to the Piave River north of Venice. Caporetto resulted in the loss of over 700,000 Italian troops, and Cadorna was relieved of command and replaced with General Armando Diaz.

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## **PIAVE RIVER**

Diaz re-energized the Italian Army, working to improve soldier morale. In November, other Allied forces arrived in theater. Bolstered by these additional forces, and well aware that their national security was a great risk, the Italians held fast and entrenched the Piave River. In early 1918, Germany withdrew its troops for their spring offensive on the Western Front. Count Conrad and General Svetozar von Bojna attacked the Piave River line as two independent forces, both of which were halted by Allied ground and air forces.

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**VITTORIO VENETO**

Diaz did not follow up his Piave River victory, but rather, waited until the situation on the Western Front allowed the release and relocation of more Allied Troops. French, British and American reinforcements were in place and ready by October. Diaz targeted Vittorio Veneto on the other side of the Piave; successive battles at Monte Grappo (23 Oct), Sacile (30 Oct), Belluno (1 Nov), and Trent (3 Nov) finally let to the Italian Army securing the long-sought victory. Trieste also fell to the Allies on 3 Nov and an armistice was signed with the Austro-Hungarian Empire the next day.

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**US ARMY IN ITALY, 1917-1918**

In response to requests from the Italian government, the 332<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment (83<sup>rd</sup> Division) and its attached medical and supply units deployed to the Italian front in July 1918. The regiment took training in mountain operations near Lake Garda, and in early October moved to Treviso, assigned to the 31<sup>st</sup> Italian Division. It participated in the pursuit of Austrians on 29 October as part of Tenth Italian Army operations and on 3 November had combat contact with the enemy at the Tagliamento River. On 4 November it crossed the Piave River.

There were additionally 30 American ambulance sections, a base hospital and 54 American pilots serving with the Italian Army. Pilots, in Italian bombardment squadrons, engaged in bombing raids behind Austrian lines, particularly during the Vittorio-Veneto offensive.

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**See also:**

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