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THE END OF AN INSTITUTION:

THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN ARMY IN ITALY, 1918

by

RONALD W. HANKS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Thesis Director’s Signature:

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Houston, Texas

April, 1977
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CHAPTER I

THE GOOD SOLDIER ŠVEJK

A nation or empire forced to gamble its existence on the field of battle presents a fascinating drama. In 1918 the Austro-Hungarian empire was put into the position of hazarding its future on the success of its armies. This work is intended as a study of the Austro-Hungarian army in Italy during the last year of World War I, as it struggled to defend and preserve the Dual Monarchy by achieving the victory that was so necessary to the survival of Austria-Hungary. It is also, ultimately, the story of the army's increasing demoralization, culminating in disintegration and collapse. This is a military history in that the greatest portion of it will be concerned with plans, campaigns, and battles. It is intended, however, to be more than a pure battle study. An army is a mirror in microcosm of the nation and society from which its members are drawn. Thus, the Austro-Hungarian army of 1918 exhibited both the strengths and flaws of the Dual Monarchy as a whole. In particular, its leaders made their decisions in the context of their perceptions of the needs of the empire and the abilities of its army. In this interplay between soldiers, generals, and country can be seen the basis of disintegration for both the army and the empire it tried to protect.

Throughout this work two main themes will predominate. The first of these centers around the Armeeoberkommando. As the supreme guiding hand of the army, its leaders attempted to maneuver a course through contending personalities and political factions in order to serve what they felt to be the best interests of the army which they presumed to be
identical with the best interests of the entire Habsburg monarchy. At the same time, they had to attempt to achieve a military victory over the enemy. The conflicts within the Armeeoberkommando and the clashes between individuals within the army chain of command had serious effects on the Armeeoberkommando's ability to maintain political power and to prosecute the war successfully. Here were sown the seeds of defeat, long before the army had actually lost any battles.

The second theme concerns the plight of the common soldier. At the mercy of both the enemy and the weaknesses in his own army, the common soldier was continually forced to answer questions of conscience. While politicians played power politics with the army's food rations, he starved; while generals played games of one-upmanship over battle plans, he died; finally, with the empire crashing in ruins, he was faced with the ultimate question of where his true loyalty lay: with the monarchy which was then only a state of mind but still involved in war or with the newly forming successor states? In the last analysis, the survival of the monarchy and the army depended on how each man answered this question.

These two themes coalesce to provide a description of an army in dissolution, an army whose worst enemies were not always on the other side of no-man's-land. The narrative will be confined to the Italian front simply because the majority of the Austro-Hungarian army was in position there. Units were fighting on both the Western and Balkan fronts and acting as garrison troops in Russia but these areas were of secondary importance. Although the Balkan front was to become unexpectedly vital during the last months of the war, the Italian front did not cease to be the focus of Austro-Hungarian attention.

In a now defunct comic strip the following conversation appeared:
Fred: Those who live by the sword die by the sword.

Hugh: Perhaps... .But I've noticed that those who live by the pen die by the pen, and I'd rather get cut in a good fight as opposed to being written off.¹

Unfortunately, the Austro-Hungarian army of the First World War suffered both fates. It fought for four years and suffered an immense number of casualties; yet most historians tend to write it off as a second-rate army, kept in the war only by a heavy leavening of imperial German soldiers. This view, however, makes it difficult for the same historians to explain the durability of the army and its successes. Therefore, a final goal of this work will be realistically to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Austro-Hungarian army and evaluate its worth and actions during the war.

Traditionally, most historians of the Dual Monarchy have considered the army as one of the mainstays of the Habsburg dynasty and of the empire.² It is important to remember, though, that the Austro-Hungarian army of 1918 was not the army of 1914. The changes in its composition were so profound as to bring into question any assumptions about the wellsprings of its loyalty. In order to illuminate these changes and make clear the differing character of the 1918 army, it is necessary to understand its prewar history and organization and examine the effects that the war wrought on the army. Therefore, although the core of this


work is concerned with the period after the Caporetto Offensive of 1917 and the "Christmas Battles" of 1917-1918, a brief narrative of the events of the war will place the actions of 1918 in a proper context. A slightly more extensive divergence concerning the Caporetto offensive is necessary since its planning and execution highly influenced the planning of the Armeeoberkommando for the June Battles of 1918.

Austria-Hungary was fortunate to possess an army whose leaders were able to learn from experience. In 1805 the army was defeated by Napoleon. The Archduke Charles was able to recognize the defects within the Austrian army and profit from them. He was then able to reorganize the empire's military structure and in 1809 deliver the first defeat ever to an army under the direct command of Napoleon. In 1866 Prussia delivered a crushing defeat to the empire which again forced the army leaders to reevaluate the military organization.

The Ausgleich of 1867 was a direct result of the loss of the 1866 war, and the concessions which the Austrians had to make to the Hungarians over the next forty years added a further dimension to the army's reorganization—the creation of a separate Hungarian military force, the Honved, to parallel the Austrian Landwehr. By 1914 the Austro-Hungarian army had undergone several modernizing reorganizations to enable it to meet the perceived needs of the new age but it was still a cumbersome weapon at best. 3

Theoretically, the basic law governing the armies of the Austro-Hungarian empire was contained in the army regulations of 1912, but when World War I broke out the old 1889 regulations had still not been entirely supplanted.\textsuperscript{4} Under the 1889 regulations there were seven military formations within the armed forces. The regular army was called the "common" army and the navy was called the "common" navy. These names referred to the fact that the regular army and navy were paid for out of revenues collected from the entire Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The second line forces consisted of the imperial and royal Landwehr, recruited from the "Austrian" portions of the empire and paid for by revenues from these lands, and the royal Hungarian Honvéd, which was recruited from, and paid for by, the "Hungarian" portion of the empire.\textsuperscript{5} The third line forces, consisting of the older classes of men, were the imperial and royal Landsturm and the royal Hungarian Landsturm.\textsuperscript{6} Finally, there was the Ersatzreserve, which was little more than an untrained manpower pool but which was supposed to "serve as a cover for the war strength of the common army and Landwehr."\textsuperscript{7}


\textsuperscript{5}"Austrian" and "Hungarian" are somewhat general terms referring to those parts of the empire that were under Austrian or Hungarian administration according to the terms of the Ausgleich of 1867.

\textsuperscript{6}Klose, Deckung des Personellen Bedarfs, Fasc. Ca. 1, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{7}Leo Geller and Hermann Jolles, Das neue Wehrgesetz und Landwehrgesetz nebst Durchführungsvorschriften. Mit ausführlichen Erläuterungen aus den Materialien bearbeitet (2nd ed., Vienna: Verlag von Moritz Perles, 1913), p. 5. This book was not an official publication; rather it was printed and sold as a public service by a private publisher. The book not only contains the text of the military laws, but also explanations of them, comparisons with the old law, and information about what each citizen was expected to do to comply with the laws.
The 1912 regulations spelled out the duties of the various organizations. "The common army is for the defense of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy," that is "all the lands assembled under the rule of his imperial and royal Apostolic Majesty. . . against external enemies and to maintain order and security within." The purpose of the Landwehr was "to support the common army in war." To contemporaries it was obvious that the government viewed the Landwehr as a "fully equal part of the armed forces." Finally, the Landsturm served "the purpose contained in the Landsturm regulations [of 1889] of supporting the common army and the Landwehr."  

Recruitment for the various formations was on a territorial basis. For the common army, recruitment areas were based on a division of the entire monarchy into sixteen corps areas. Each corps area supplied the men for two divisions of infantry; thus the common army consisted of thirty-two divisions. The Landwehr recruited eight divisions from the Austrian half of the empire and the Honvéd recruited six on a territorial basis conforming approximately to the six corps areas within the Hungarian administrative area; a further two Honvéd divisions were obtained on a non-territorial selection basis.  

Corps areas were then further subdivided so that there were 112 regimental districts for the common armed forces. Fifty-eight of the

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8 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
9 Ibid., p. 4.
10 Ibid., p. 5.
12 Ibid.
districts were in Austrian lands and forty-seven were in Hungarian areas. Four districts in Bosnia-Herzegovina recruited especially for their own elite Bosnian-Herzegovinian regiments. In addition, three coastal districts along the Adriatic served as recruiting areas for the common navy. Finally, specialty units such as Kaiserjäger, Standschützen, and various mountain units were formed from volunteers with no regard to the district of origin. Naturally, men from distinct localities tended to volunteer for such units giving them a territorial character:

The young men of the empire were liable to be called to duty from January 1 of the year of their twenty-first birthday. In general, a man inducted into the common army was expected to serve two years on active service and then ten years in the reserve. More specialized branches such as the cavalry and artillery required three years of active service followed by seven years in the reserves. The Honvéd and Landwehr required the same length of service as the common army for the infantry and cavalry; these services had no integral artillery.

Certain circumstances allowed men to go directly into the Ersatzreserve without performing regular active duty. As a bureaucratic state, the monarchy spelled out every possible exception, from the only son of a widowed mother to "the only brother or half-brother of

13 Ibid., p. 112.
15 Geller-Jolles, Das neue Wehrgesetz, p. 7; Klose, Deckung des Personellen Bedarfs, p. 2.
16 Klose, Deckung des Personellen Bedarfs, p. 2; Geller-Jolles, Das neue Wehrgesetz, p. 147.
an entirely orphaned sister, as well as the only half-brother of a fatherless sister."\textsuperscript{17}

As each class of conscripts was called up, each man's future was decided by lot. The common army's ranks were filled first, with the exact number of inductees depending on the army's expected needs and the budget allocation. Once the common army had the men it needed most of the remainder of the class were remanded to either the Landwehr or Honvéd, depending on the location of their home district.\textsuperscript{18} If the common army, Landwehr, and Honvéd all reached their quotas, the remainder of each class passed into the Ersatzreserve. The last organization, the Landsturm, was composed of men who had reached forty-two years of age or had served their time in the other formations. The Landsturm was supposed to be a purely rear-echelon organization. Its men were expected, in time of war, to serve as line of communication and supply troops with no combat responsibilities.\textsuperscript{19}

The Austro-Hungarian army was not really a large army for an empire that was considered one of the great powers of Europe. The common army was only allowed to induct 103,100 men per year; the Landwehr could take in 19,970; and the Honvéd was limited to 12,500—a grand total of 135,570 men.\textsuperscript{20} The small size of the army was traceable to the empire's failure to update the 1889 law for so long. Thus while the size of the empire increased from 40,000,00 to 52,000,000,

\textsuperscript{17} Geller-Jolles, Das neue Wehrgesetz, p. 65.

\textsuperscript{18} Lucas, Austro-Hungarian Infantry, pp. 11-15, contains details of conscription procedures.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 8.

in population, the number of recruits the services were allowed in each year rose only 26,000 men. More and more young men were given exemptions, and increasing numbers of them went directly into the Ertsatzreserve in which they received little useful training. The army commanders were continually faced with the difficulty of finding enough men to serve in the combat units and "Conrad had a bitter quarrel with Archduke Franz Ferdinand because he [Conrad] wanted to take flute-players from military bands and train them as gunners." General Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, who served as the imperial German liaison officer to the Austrian Armeoberkommando during the early part of the war, blamed the nature of the Austro-Hungarian state for the shortage of personnel in the army: "Austria was a bureaucratic state. The number of civil servants in Cisleithania exceeded the combined strength of the common army and Austrian Landwehr. "The civil service saw in every army increase a danger to their own interests." As a result of all of these factors, the peacetime strength of the common army was approximately 450,000 officers and men. A total mobilization of all organizations, including the barely trained Ertsatzreserve, could assemble a force of 3,350,000 troops, but this merely


24Klose, Deckung des Personellen Bedarfes, p. 8; Austria, Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914-1918 (7 vols., Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1930-38), Vol. I, p. 186. This number would be ration strength rather than rifle strength which would be much lower. Early in the war Austro-Hungarian rifle strength ran about 45% of ration strength. Later even this ratio declined.
produced an illusion of strength because the formations other than the common army did not maintain a sufficient level of training to be considered combat ready. While the other European countries were spending money and time in order to ensure that their reserves could fight alongside their professional soldiers, the Austro-Hungarian army had to devote its resources to its first line troops. As a result, "Conrad had at his disposal a first-rate professional army, but no trained reserves."  

During the war 8,500,000 men were mobilized. This number represents about 75% of the eligible men in the empire. Of this number, the highest total under arms in one year was 5,100,000 in 1917. Again, this number is somewhat misleading as an indicator of combat strength because it counts all men in the armed forces. An estimate of the actual number of riflemen in the infantry, cavalry, and Jäger battalions as of December 1, 1917 is 915,800—less than 20% of the total. In an effort to release men from support work and put them into the front lines, the monarchy instituted a system of "women auxiliaries" in mid-September of 1917. This began with 28,000 women, an insignificant number, and in the long run no notable success was achieved in putting more men into the trenches.

This, then, was the Austro-Hungarian army that took to the field in 1914. It was a small but good professional army backed by a large


28 Ibid., p. 495.
number of ill-trained reserves. It is also evident that the "mainstay of empire" was highly diluted with civilians who could be expected to bring their national prejudices into the army. Whether or not these soldier-civilians would put loyalty to the empire ahead of nationalistic distrust was a question that was to worry the army leadership throughout the war. This army was a cumbersome, complex, and yet fragile weapon. Wielding it would require an expert and delicate hand on the controls, and there was reason to believe that the army's commanders might not have this sensitivity to its problems.

When World War I broke out in 1914, the man at the apex of the army command pyramid was the emperor, Francis Joseph. The old emperor did not hold an official military position, but in actuality he had the final word in all matters, whether civilian or military. His brother monarch, William II of Germany, called himself the supreme warlord and remained commander in chief of the German army though he took little direct part in the actual conduct of military operations; such a pose was not for Francis Joseph. He often wore military uniforms but named Archduke Frederick commander in chief of the army. Overall, the character of Francis Joseph as a war leader can be seen in a statement he made to his officers: "Now then, gentlemen, we may be going to rack and ruin, but it must be respectable." 29 Francis Joseph accepted his limitations and was willing to delegate his authority to those more able than himself. Above all, he was an honorable and fatherly figurehead whom all in the empire could look up to and

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respect, even if they disapproved of the empire. His death in 1916 was a great blow.

In command of the army was the Archduke Frederick, who held the position so that command of the armed forces could be retained in the royal family. This is not necessarily to say that Frederick was a dilettante or an incompetent army chief. Many German authors and military men have tended to condemn him; one stated that he was "long since known to be incompetent. He and his officers had neglected everything that might have contributed toward troop training and discipline." 30 Those more lenient or tactful have judged him the "brave, honorable Army Supreme Commander," 31 but such a description coming Germany's liaison officer to the Armeeoberkommando indicates that he was unable to find very many positive things to say for Frederick.

Austrian commentators have generally acknowledged Frederick's lack of brilliance, but as one politician remarked, Frederick "very rightly looked upon his post not as that of a leader of operations, but as a connecting link between us and Germany, and between the army and the Emperor Francis Joseph." 32 Archduke Frederick had a tact and firmness of character that was necessary to his post; he could deal with the Germans firmly by reason of his royalty but was realistic enough to recognize his own deficiencies and stay out of


military decisions, leaving them to his chief of staff. 33

Pretense aside, the actual commander of the Austro-Hungarian army was its chief of staff, General of the Infantry Franz Freiherr Conrad von Hützendorf. Conrad was probably one of the most competent soldiers and strategists in Europe during the World War I era. It seems inevitable that he will always be the center of controversy. Opinion on Conrad varied widely in his own time with regard to his abilities and his success as the virtual commander of the Austro-Hungarian forces early in the war. His later tenure as a subordinate army group commander in Italy merely added another dimension to the disagreements, and the passage of time has not settled the questions. Strangely, his reputation stands higher today among non-Austrian writers and historians than among his own countrymen. 34

As a rule, his German contemporaries thought well of Conrad. General Erich von Falkenhayn often clashed with Conrad over the ordering of priorities involved in fighting the war, but he respected his abilities and recommended Conrad's plan over that of General Erich Ludendorff for the successful Gorlice-Tarnow offensive. 35 General Freytag-Loringhoven commented: "had he an army such as the German to command, his daring plans would not have been condemned to frustration." 36

33Redlich, Emperor Francis Joseph, p. 528. Redlich states that Francis Joseph had actually issued a confidential rescript that deprived Frederick of all real power when he took the post. The rescript formally invested the true authority in the person of Frederick's chief of staff.

34Although not intended as an apology for Conrad, this study will show that much of the criticism of him was hardly warranted.


36Freytag-Loringhoven, Menschen und Dinge, p. 211.
Austrian assessments of Conrad have been more critical of his abilities than have German ones. Francis Joseph is supposed to have considered Conrad "a sort of military ideologist lacking sufficient sense of military economy or sufficient ability of using men and resources at his disposal to advantage."\(^{37}\) As the war continued to drag on, the emperor began to lose confidence in the chief of staff.\(^{38}\) The death of Francis Joseph in 1916 prevented the differences between the two men from becoming critical. The most consistent criticism of Conrad was his inability to match his ends to the means at his disposal. The emperor's complaint about this was echoed by General Alfred Krauß, one of Austria-Hungary's most brilliant commanders, who commented that in war "Conrad unfortunately lacked knowledge of operative necessities."\(^{39}\)

Conrad may best be compared with one of his contemporaries, Winston Churchill. He had an outstanding ability to see the enemy's strategic weakness, but would then become carried away by this insight and commit his armies to action without seriously questioning their ability to carry out his grand schemes. Conrad might have won glory if he had been fortunate enough to have lived in a different age. If he had commanded the armies of Prince Eugene of Savoy, or even Joseph Radetzky's in the nineteenth century, he may have gone down in history

\(^{37}\)Redlich, Emperor Francis Joseph, pp. 528-29.


\(^{39}\)Alfred Krauß, "Führertum" [(Vienna: Hrsg. mit Bewilligung d. Verfasser vom Offizierverein d. Stadt Bern=Bern Offizierverein, 1931)], p. 7. This is a bound, typewriter copy in the Vienna Kriegsarchiv of a speech given by General Krauß to an officer's study group in Bern, Switzerland.
as one of the greatest soldiers of the Habsburg monarchy. Condemned
to leading sometimes half-hearted and badly trained troops during the
twilight of an empire, he was to end the war out of favor and in near
disgrace. 40 An English military historian considered that "not one of
his contemporaries surpassed him; but the God of Battles bestowed
favors upon him parsimoniously." 41

Despite the failings of this command structure, the Austro-Hun-
garian army managed to avoid defeat during the first months of World
War I and even enjoyed some modest success at times. Conrad was at
least a highly competent general, and his staff, if overbearing and
politically naive, were competent soldiers and planners. In 1916,
however, Austria-Hungary was struck a staggering blow, not of the en-
emy's making: Francis Joseph died. He had ruled the monarchy since
1848, and to the peoples of the empire he was an institution, perhaps
the major unifying force in a land of conflicting loyalties. His
death left a void in the lives of his subjects which his successor
was unable to fill.

In many respects the new emperor, Charles, should have made an
excellent leader, and in less stressful circumstances he probably
would have been. He had an empathy with the peoples of the empire
and understood their national longings and growing revulsion with the

40 Feldmarschall Conrad von Hötendorf, Aus Meiner Dienstzeit,
1906-1918 (5 vols., Vienna: Rikola Verlag, 1921-25), although never
completed, is the best source for an understanding of Conrad since
his imperiousness and abrasiveness show through. See also Oscar
Regels, Feldmarschall Conrad. Auftrag und Erfüllung 1906-1918 (Vienna:
Verlag Herold, 1955); and August Urbanski von Ostrymiecz, Conrad von
Hötendorf, Soldat und Mensch (Graz: Ulrich Mosers Verlag, 1938).

41 Falls, Caporetto, p. 174.
war, a feeling he shared. Unfortunately, he was trapped in the role of a war leader, a part which he, nevertheless, should have been well qualified to play. Charles had received extensive military training, and prior to the war had been rated as an excellent battalion commander. During the war he had briefly commanded an army corps during the 1916 offensive against Italy in the Trentino. Although he had shown a certain hesitancy at accepting the loss of life that was characteristic of World War I battles, his overall performance was not bad. The problems arose when he became emperor.

Charles had good reason to doubt the political competency of Conrad and the other senior officers of the Armeeoberkommando. The Armeeoberkommando had used the emergency powers granted them over war zones to assume control over the civil administrative affairs of large parts of the empire. In their distrust of nationalist and pacifist feelings, they managed to alienate a great number of the inhabitants of the monarchy who might otherwise have remained firm in their support of the government.\(^{42}\) Charles felt that the army had gained a stranglehold on affairs within the monarchy and his first major move as emperor was to make wholesale changes among the army leadership. His first act was to dismiss the conservative Archduke Frederick and take over command of the army himself. The changes instituted by Charles were not well considered and as one commentator has remarked, the emperor only

"replaced one set of politically incompetent officers by another set of military incompetent ones." It was a dangerous step for Charles to take in a time of war, but possibly the most damning thing about his purge of the headquarters is that he did not seem to have the slightest idea he had caused any problem. In an attempt to prevent a military abuse of civil authority, Charles had attempted to centralize all of the monarchy's powers under his own hand. Charles' own weaknesses now began to become apparent.

General Artur Arz, the new emperor's personally chosen chief of staff, wrote that he was quite impressed with Charles' intelligence and judgement, but considering Arz's indebtedness to Charles, he was not the most reliable character witness. General von Cramon considered Charles to be rather "flighty" to have such responsibilities. There is also little doubt that Charles was very much under the influence of his wife, the redoubtable empress, Zita. Flightiness and/or a lack of will power in the emperor was not necessarily a debilitating weakness—providing that the emperor's subordinates were chosen with care. Charles also failed here. His most momentous decision was to replace the strong-willed chief of staff, Conrad, with a man of his own choice, a man whom he felt he could control, General Artur Arz von Straussenburg. To be sure, there was more to the matter than obtaining a

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45 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 132.

46 Falls, Caporetto, pp. 5-6.
yes man; even Francis Joseph had been losing confidence in Conrad's ability to bring the war to a rapid and agreeable outcome. The move was also a deliberate attempt to purge the "war party" from positions of power.\footnote{47} Zita was suspected of being one of the major figures pushing for the dismissal of Conrad, but others around the throne had taken up the question as a political maneuver. The choice of Arz to succeed him was not, however, a step in the right direction.

No one has questioned that Arz was a man of high intelligence and considerable military experience. He had been quite successful early in the war as a corps commander and later as an army commander. An Austrian assessed Arz as having "far less genius; his aptitude lay in the area of organization, in his phenomenal memory, his quick comprehension."\footnote{48} On the other hand, his deficiencies were appalling in light of Charles' own weakness of character. He was considered "docile"\footnote{49} and described as a man for "fair weather and carefree hours"\footnote{50} whose favorite saying "I recognize no difficulties" might well have been "I evade all difficulties."\footnote{51} General Krauß stated that "I could observe that the emperor would send for the deputy, not the chief, if he wished anything arranged or discussed."\footnote{52} Krauß also observed:

\footnote{47}{Brook-Shepherd, The Last Habsburg, p. 59.}
\footnote{48}{Peter Feldl, Das verspielte Reich. Die letzten Tage Österreich-Ungarns (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1968), p. 229.}
\footnote{49}{Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, pp. 320-21.}
\footnote{50}{Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 134.}
\footnote{51}{Ibid., p. 166.}
The chief of the general staff always accompanied the emperor only as a traveling companion. On these journeys they only inspected troops, gave out medals, and held empty, non-binding discussions. A clarification of views, detailed discussions of leadership, or instructions for the highest army leaders was really never the intention of a journey. In the meantime, the spirited worker of the Armeeoberkommando, the deputy chief of staff, sat and worked on plans and orders.53

The deputy chief of staff in whom so much trust was invested was Colonel (later Brigadier General) Alfred Freiherr von Waldstätten, who also served as the chief of operations for the Armeeoberkommando. He was a brilliant planner and a hard worker who was thrust into a situation that was possibly beyond him. So long as he could stay in his element, which was planning, he functioned quite well. Whenever he was forced into the leadership role that his position now required of him at times, it became evident that he lacked the quality of leadership. General Cramon simply felt that Waldstätten was "still not mature enough" for the post.54

With Charles and Arz often involved in trivial matters of military housekeeping, Waldstätten attempted to conduct a sort of personal diplomacy, going directly to lower commanders instead of following normal channels. While this informal arrangement had its advantages for Waldstätten, in general it was a disaster. He did not have the rank or reputation to impress army group commanders like Conrad or General Svetozar Boroević von Bojna. As a result, chains of command were not clear, the rest of the Armeeoberkommando was often in the dark as to what was going on, and commanders such as Conrad and

53 Ibid., p. 249.

54 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 135.
Boroević often saw fit to follow their own whims rather than obey a younger, lower-ranking officer giving verbal instructions, even if he did have the technical backing of his position as deputy chief of staff. The situation was uncomfortable for all concerned.  

Command structure in the Austro-Hungarian army demonstrated all of the hallmarks of a dynastic state in transition to a modern state. Although the army command was still permeated at higher levels by archdukes and other members of the Habsburg family, nobility was no longer the prime requisite for command. The lessons of 1866 led to an emphasis on staffwork and professional training, which made the career less attractive to the noble dilettantes. The day had passed when an officer who provided himself with field glasses was laughed at for giving himself "airs" or would be mocked as "pedantic" if he tried to obtain maps of possible theaters of operations.  

Professional officers received a good military education at one of the several officers' schools within the empire. The primary officers' school was the Theresianische Militärakademie in Wiener Neustadt, but there was a second academy for training officers in the technical services: a third academy trained Landwehr officers while the fourth trained Honvéd officers. In addition, fourteen cadet schools existed which graduated non-commissioned "ensigns." These men

55 Krauß, Ursachen unserer Niederlage, pp. 249-50 discusses this.

56 See, for example, Dr. Artur Gaspar, Unsere Dynastie im Felde, 1914-1915 (Vienna: Druck und Verlag der K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1915); and Colonel Alois Veltze, Unsere Heerführer (Vienna: Verlag Roller & Co., 1917).

served with regiments for two years after graduation and were then promoted to junior officer rank. Several of these schools taught aspiring officers in their native language, so that lack of the knowledge of German was not crippling to the beginning officer.

This is not to say that the products of these schools were always perfect officers. Gordon Craig noted that officers of the imperial German army became infuriated with their Austrian counterparts because of "a tendency to accept and even to take a certain melancholy pride in their own fecklessness." While this is a somewhat exaggerated description, it may contain an element of truth in that the Austrians seemed to have great difficulty in getting their priorities organized. As late as December, 1917, when there were shortages of men in all ranks, and when a reorganization of the army and changes in tactical doctrine were under way, an officer teaching at a school of one year volunteers reported that "an inspecting general tested us on the genealogy of the imperial house and was fearfully put out when no one could answer his question as to the birthday of an archduchess."

An officer who wished for advancement, however, could not hope to muddle along. One of the prewar requirements was that an officer posted to a regiment must learn the native tongue of that regiment within three years or be relieved of his position. In one sense, this requirement was one of the great unifying factors of the officer

58 Lucas, Austro-Hungarian Infantry, p. 15.


corps; expected to be conversant in several languages and able to get along in the very diverse lands of the empire, it became largely supranational.

Despite fears of "germanization" and "German dominance" of the army, nationality or race was little or no hindrance to promotion. In the lower ranks of officers at platoon and company level, Germans did predominate, but this seems to have been more of an economic and social phenomenon than any indication of bias. Middle-class German families were more likely to consider the army as a suitable career for a younger son than families of other nationalities, and it is precisely this class sector that traditionally produces junior officer ranks in most European armies. In the higher ranks, the Germans actually held a lower percentage of posts than the percentage of Germans in the monarchy as a whole. At the outbreak of World War I, for instance, the Austro-Hungarian army had 4,370 active Waffenmeister (junior officers or non-commissioned officers with technical school training as armorers). Of these, 1,134 (26%) were Czech and only 797 (18%) German. 62 Among general officers the nationality percentage was nearly identical to the nationality percentage of the monarchy; in fact, only one of the six field marshals in 1918 was of German extraction. 63 Of particular interest is the percentage of Jewish officers. Although men of Jewish extraction comprised about 5% of the empire's citizens and a negligible percentage of the professional officers and ranks, they

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63 Patera, Unter Österreichs Fahnen, p. 349.
provided 16.4% of the empire's reserve officers. What all of these figures show is that despite postwar nationalist propaganda the officer corps of the Austro-Hungarian army was a multinational one and not a sinecure for Germans.

This diversity does, however, point out the real weakness of the Austro-Hungarian army—the number of races, nationalities, and languages within it. There were ten recognized nationalities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>% of empire</th>
<th>% of army</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian (Ruthene)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovene</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbo-Croatian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again the figures tend to show that the Austro-Hungarian army was not composed of subject races lorded over by German officers. The percentage of each nationality serving in the army is equivalent to the percentage of that nationality in the empire.64

Needless to say, communications were a serious problem. As indicated, the officers of a regiment were supposed to learn the language spoken by most of the soldiers in the regiment, but this system tended to break down under the pressure of a protracted war with its high casualty rates. During the summer battles of 1916 a cadet was posted to a Honvéd regiment that had lost all of its officers. He spoke no Hungarian and his men spoke no German. During a battle "this difficulty became even more serious. A man came running up and gave a

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report of which the cadet did not understand a word. While he considered what the man might possibly have meant, the enemy came storming over the hill after him."  

Such a problem had long existed, of course, and the army had attempted to overcome it by the institution of a command language (probably the basis of germanization accusations). Each recruit was taught a selection of eighty words of German. These eighty words covered the most common and necessary commands and instructions so that at least a modicum of communication was possible. This device was mandatory since in some divisions several languages might be in use. In 1918, for example, Lieutenant General Ernst Horsetzky von Hornthal had under his command the 48th infantry division. This unit contained four regiments: the 73rd (German), the 79th (Serbo-Croatian), the 119th (Hungarian), and the 120th (Polish); the storm battalion was composed of one company from each regiment in the usual fashion, and therefore each of its companies spoke a different language.

For units in the front lines, the situation was difficult. A battalion adjutant for a German division described the problems associated with being in the line between a Hungarian unit and a Croatian regiment. The "communications" officers would meet as regulations required, give formal reports to each other that no one understood,
share a cigarette, and return to their own area none the wiser. "When the enemy attack began, my comrade delivered a long report in Hungarian and disappeared. Why, I don't know to this day."68

It is obvious that the mixture of nationalities in the army posed distinct problems, even if the troops were completely loyal to the empire, but from the beginning of the war there was reason to question the loyalty of some national contingents. When the call-up came in 1914, a few units from socialist working class districts in Prague caused disturbances and questioned why they were supposed to march off to Russia and fight their fellow Slavs. Then, early in 1915, a Czech regiment from Prague (the 28th infantry regiment) deserted, practically en masse, to the Russians. Later in May of the same year, the 36th regiment from Mlada Boleslav surrendered with minimal resistance. In later years, nationalist historians, primarily Czech, have inflated these two examples to nearly mythical status, painting word pictures of numerous Czech units deserting the corrupt Austro-Hungarian cause and marching over to their Russian Slav brothers with bands playing and banners flying. In truth, the above two incidents are the only documented cases of mass desertion or flight until the army collapsed in 1918.69 It is possible that some units did not always resist bravely and perhaps surrendered when it was not necessary, but

68 Gallian, Der österreichische Soldat im Weltkrieg, pp. 49-50.

the number and extent of these incidents has been exaggerated.

Though incidents of disaffection such as these were relatively rare, they created deep feelings of mistrust among some units of the Austro-Hungarian army. The imperial Germans, however, were completely aghast. They had not taken such possibilities into their calculations and now they were unsure if they could trust their allies.  

The Austro-Hungarian generals were less worried about further outbreaks such as occurred in early 1915 than their German counterparts. As a result, the monarchy's generals continued to employ their Slavic units just as they had earlier, but the German Supreme Command no longer had the slightest faith in the Austro-Hungarian Slavic units. These German apprehensions further strained the relationship between the two armies throughout the war.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the situation was greatly exaggerated at the time. Isolated instances of disaffection did occur, but in the great majority of cases, the various nationalities fought bravely and loyally for the Dual Monarchy. The empire, for

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70 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 78.


for its own part, had no wish to put this loyalty to too stern a test. The Armeeoberkommando made many transfers of individuals and units so that Italians did not have to fight against the Italians, Serbs did not have to fight on the Balkan front, and so that as few Slavs as possible had to fight on the Russian and Balkan fronts.\footnote{Hecht, "Fragen zur Heereserganzung," contains the most thorough account of the shuffling of units that went on during the war in attempts to prevent embarrassing confrontations.} This seems to have been a relatively successful policy. General Horsetzky stated that during the war he had over forty different regiments from various parts of the empire under his command and until October, 1918, none of them had to be reminded of their duty.\footnote{Ernst Horsetzky, "Österreich-Ungarns Heer im Weltkrieg," in Österreich-Ungarns Heer und Flotte im Weltkrieg (Vienna: Verlaganstalt Tyrolia, [1928]), pp. 13-14.}

Why then did the Austro-Hungarian army acquire the reputation of a helter-skelter collection of disaffected nationalities, kept from running amok only by "the threat of reprisals upon their relatives at home."\footnote{G. W. Ward Price, "The Austrian as a Foe," The Contemporary Review, Vol. CXIV; (September, 1918), p. 267.} The most likely origin of this myth stems from the nationalist politicians who began during the war to agitate for the breakup of the empire into nation-states. After the war, the new nations fostered the theory to help bolster their claims at the peace conference, and the Germans used it to explain their defeat. It was a facesaving way to explain the loss of the war.

As the chief of staff of an Austro-Hungarian army group on the Italian front pointed out, however, military units of any nationality
can have a bad day. Whether it is afterward termed a "heroic sacrifice" or a "shameful" event seems largely determined by whether the unit involved was German or Slavic.\textsuperscript{76} Also, in view of the importance given the nationality problems of the empire by historians, it is simplest to categorize all signs of military disaffection as stemming from nationalistic causes since the case has already been "proved."
The fallacy of such a simplification has been pointed out by the English historian, Norman Stone: "had France been a 'nationality state' no doubt the Nivelle mutinies would have been ascribed to motives less basic than disgust at the futility of war."\textsuperscript{77}

Considering the handicaps under which the Austro-Hungarian army had to function, the wonder is not that it had its problems but that it could discharge its duty at all. Since the regular army was so small, the Landwehr and Honvéd troops had to fight alongside the common army instead of acting as a reserve. This in turn meant that the Landsturm, which had been conceived of as a non-combat auxillary, was forced into a reserve combat role at times.\textsuperscript{78} As a result, Landsturm infantry went into combat in 1914 armed with obsolete 11mm single shot rifles and wearing obsolete uniforms. "Some indeed, did not even have this much uniform and wore a black and gold brassard on their arm to show their military status."\textsuperscript{79} Another inevitable result was the

\textsuperscript{76} Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J."
\textsuperscript{77} Stone, "Army and Society in the Habsburg Monarchy," p. 103.
\textsuperscript{79} Lucas, Austro-Hungarian Infantry, p. 8.
proliferation of irregular military formations such as the Stand-
schützen, the volunteer rifle battalions, and the various "national' 
legions.

It is evident that despite considerable improvements, the 
Austro-Hungarian army was not prepared to fight a modern war. The 
monarchy's arms expenditures for 1912 were one-half to one-third 
those of the other major European powers with the exception of Italy. 
Its per capita arms expenditure was lower than that of any European 
power except Russia. The numerical strength of its professional 
army was also proportionally smaller.\textsuperscript{80}

Difficulties extended into theory as well as numbers. "Attack 
at any price" was the ruling doctrine and, like the French, the 
Austro-Hungarians had to learn the fallacy of this precept the hard 
way. The failure of the army leaders to appreciate the power of new 
defensive weapons paralleled the mistakes of other European armies. 
Austro-Hungarian generals still considered the cavalry to be the main 
striking force, and the artillery was assigned a minor role; co-
operation between infantry and artillery was seldom even considered, 
much less practiced.\textsuperscript{81}

For reasons of national pride the necessity for mobility in a 
modern war and the need for easy railroad transport of men and sup-
plies were ignored. Hungary used a different gauge of railroad track 
than that used in Austrian portions of the empire.\textsuperscript{82} Most lines in

\textsuperscript{80} Horsetzky, "Österreich-Ungarns Heer im Weltkrieg," discusses 
this at length. See also Stone, "Conrad von Hotzendorf," p. 485.

\textsuperscript{81} Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. I, p. 34.

\textsuperscript{82} Norman Stone, "V. Moltke-Conrad: Relations between the Austro-
Hungarian and German General Staffs, 1909-14," The Historical Journal, 
the eastern part of the monarchy ran through Budapest for purely commercial reasons. It took the Austrians longer to move one division from the Balkans to Italy than it took the Germans to transport two army corps from the Meuse to the Vistula, a distance three times as great.  

Conrad had done his best to improve the army, but as war approached, he could not be satisfied with the progress. He had to face the probability of a two-front war against Serbia and Russia, plus the growing likelihood that Italy would bolt the Triple Alliance and open a third front. He fully realized that Austria-Hungary was ill-prepared to face such odds, but he was never fully able to convince his German counterparts that there was any danger in Austria-Hungary's position. Germany's leaders were committed to an emphasis on the Western Front and adhered to Alfred Schlieffen's dictum that "Austria's fate will be decided not on the Bug but on the Seine!"  

Like many military maxims, this one would only hold true if the enemy also read it and believed it, but German optimism did not prevail. When war broke out, the fate of the Austro-Hungarian army was decided in Galicia.  

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85 Norman Stone, The Eastern Front, 1914-1917 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), is probably the best study of the preliminary and early stages of the war in the east that is available. See also Norman Stone, "Die Mobilmachung der österreichisch-ungarischen Armee, 1914," Militargeschichtliche Mitteilungen, No. 16 (February, 1974), which is especially informative and useful since he used this article to retract some of his earlier conclusions concerning Austro-Hungarian planning. Emil Ratzenhofer, "Die österreichisch-ungarischen Aufrufe und Friedenpläne--Durchführung," Schweizerische Monatschrift für Offiziere aller Waffen, Vol. 43 (1931), pp. 1-18, presents an interesting, insiders view of Austro-Hungarian problems at the outbreak of the war, especially their miscalculations.
Most of the Russian army was thrown against the Austrian forces in Galicia, and the fall and winter battles took a terrible toll from Austro-Hungarian ranks. In Serbia, Austro-Hungarian casualties also reached unexpected proportions. "Eight hundred and forty-five thousand of the 900,000 men who had originally been on the pay-roll in August 1914 were no longer on it by the end of November."86 The turnover in the professional officer ranks was tremendous and "soon brought the armies to a point where many field officers were not professional soldiers but ex-civilians, who brought into military positions of influence, the political disaffection and racial unrest which the Army had always tried to avert."87

Among the higher ranks casualties were not so heavy, but the fall battles provided a test of competence which many generals failed. Their ranks were shaken, and many senior officers observed the rest of the war from desks. The new leaders were those that had demonstrated some ability in 1914.88 The senior officers were all that was left of the old army. They had to lead a militia army in battles on three fronts for the next four years, and this raised the question whether the new armies of the empire would match the old army in loyalty to the emperor and the monarchy. To the surprise of many, the new army met the challenge and showed a willingness to sacrifice that kept the Dual Monarchy afloat until 1918. The good soldier Švejk was loyal, after all.

87 Lucas, Austro-Hungarian Infantry, p. 9.
88 This is a simplification of course. Many of the new leaders were also merely those that could find others to blame for disaster.
CHAPTER II

TWELVE IS A LUCKY NUMBER

The war on the Eastern front was to drag on, swallowing men and equipment that Austria-Hungary could ill afford to lose. A more immediate concern for the Armeeoberkommando during early 1915 was the growing probability that Italy would declare war on the Dual Monarchy.\footnote{The background of the Italian declaration of war is relatively complex, and historians do not yet seem to have arrived at a fully accepted explanation. Leo Valiani, "Italian-Austro-Hungarian Negotiations, 1914-1915," in Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse (eds.), 1914: The Coming of the First World War (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 106-131, offers a traditional interpretation as, to a lesser extent, does Gerard E. Silberstein, "The High Command and Diplomacy in Austria-Hungary, 1914-1916," The Journal of Modern History, Vol. XLII, No. 4 (December, 1970), pp. 586-605. John A. Thayer, Italy and the Great War: Politics and Culture, 1870-1915 (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), maintains that Italy was bent on war at any price. A more modified view is that of William Renzi in "Italy Enters the War," History of the First World War, Vol. II, No. 16 (n. d.), pp. 873-881, who argues that Italy was pushed into the war by a relatively small clique of politicians, against the will of the majority of the population. Giorgio dei Vecchio, The Moral Basis of Italy's War (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1917), should be read simply because it typifies the Italian, wartime propaganda viewpoint, as does Anthony Hope, in Why Italy is with the Allies (London: Richard Clay & Sons, Ltd., 1917). In addition, there are the various government "redbooks."} Austria-Hungary was already fighting on two fronts, and the threat that a third front might be opened was a great source of concern to the army. The only possible hope was that diplomacy might succeed in at least keeping Italy neutral, but this was a slim prospect at best.
Austria-Hungary was bound to be outraged by the diplomatic maneuvering which surrounded Italy's declaration of war. Although a member of the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Italy did not immediately join them in a declaration of war in 1914. The Italians had the right to renege on the alliance since the treaty was strictly defensive and Austria's declaration of war against Serbia was difficult to construe as a defensive action. In fact, Austria-Hungary had never been so sure of Italy's adherence to the alliance as the Germans. Falkenhayn had placed his hopes on the promises of the chief of the Italian general staff, General Alberto Pollio, but he had the bad grace to die before the outbreak of the war.² It is unlikely in any circumstance that Pollio could have changed the course of Italian policy. Irredentism had been such a driving force in Italian politics and foreign relations since uni-

fication that it was inevitable that Austria-Hungary and Italy would come to a parting of the ways. Nearly all of Italy's outstanding irredentist claims were now made on Austro-Hungarian lands.³

Italy's bargaining position in early 1915 was enviable. With Italy as an ally or benevolent neutral, the Central Powers had one less frontier to defend. The Entente Powers avidly sought her active participation on their side, for it would not only bring a new army into the war on their side but it would also open up another


³See, for example, the statement that “for more than a generation the Trieste question was kept alive so that riotous mobs should throw their stones through the windows of the Austro-Hungarian embassy instead of through the windows of the Italian Home Office,” in A. J. P. Taylor, Trieste (New York: Committee of South-Slavic Americans, 1945), p. 4.
front. A bidding war for Italy began, but the result was a foregone conclusion, since the Entente Powers could offer more territorial concessions than the Central Powers. Territorial concessions would have to come from Austrian lands, and the Entente Powers were more willing to promise these areas than Austria. Entente promises, internal political questions, and some minor setbacks to the Central Powers in Russia determined Italy's course of action.

On April 26, 1915, Italy and the Entente Powers signed the Treaty of London. The treaty guaranteed possession of the Trentino, Istria, Dalmatia, and the Adriatic islands to Italy, plus spheres of influence in other parts of the Mediterranean, in return for an Italian declaration of war on the Central Powers. In accordance with this agreement, Italy declared war on Austria on May 23, 1915, but significantly did not declare war on Germany. From Austria-Hungary's point of view, a more important fact was that Germany did not declare war on Italy. Germany's explanation for not declaring war was that so long as Italy and Germany were at peace, Italy could be employed as route for messages to and from the outside world. Whatever the truth of the matter, the general opinion in the Dual Monarchy was that Germany was more interested in achieving its own goals at the possible expense of an ally.

There is little reliable and accurate information on the state of preparedness of the Italian army at any time during the war.

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4 René Albrecht-Carrière, Italy at the Paris Peace Conference (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), contains the text of the treaty as well as the texts of several of the offers and counter offers made to Italy by the two sides. Austria's offers were fair in that she offered all territories possible, consistent with honor.
Italian historians are probably more guilty of excessive glorification of the strengths and virtues of their armies and leadership than the writers of any other country. Unfortunately, many of the contemporary English and American accounts are too enmeshed in war propaganda, defending gallant allies and castigating bestial enemies, to be any more reliable. Still, a certain amount of valid information can be sifted out of various accounts.

Much of Italy's unwillingness to become involved in the European war during 1914 can be ascribed to the sad condition of the Italian army. Its supplies and stores had never been great, and what little existed had been heavily depleted during the Italian campaign to subdue Tripoli during 1911-1912. The task of rebuilding the army's combat readiness was not an easy one, particularly since the majority of the Italians were in favor of neutrality. Still, by June of 1915 the Italian army had been expanded to formidable proportions in comparison to the forces that Austria-Hungary could spare to defend the border with Italy. For the campaign against Austria, Italy could deploy 549 battalions of infantry against the monarchy's 234 battalions, 166 squadrons of cavalry against Austria's 21, and most importantly, 434 batteries of guns

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5 Cyril Hofferter-Goldsmid, *Diary of a Liaison Officer in Italy, 1918* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), is a good example of this type of assessment.


7 Renzi, "Italy Enters the War," p. 877.
against Austria's 155.  

At the beginning of the war the Italian standing army was composed of the two youngest classes of recruits. The next six classes had served their time in the regular army and had passed into the reserve army, while the eighth through twelfth classes had gone into the mobile militia. Finally, the seven last classes of men, still of military age, formed the territorial militia. Like most of the other European powers in the First World War, Italy discovered that this neat organizational scheme was insufficient and could not supply the men necessary to replace casualties. First, the reserve, then the mobile militia, and finally the territorials were co-opted into the regular army. Service periods were lengthened until by 1917 "the classes of 1874 to 1899, that is 26 classes, stood under arms."  

Quality among the Italian troops varied widely. The mountain troops—the Alpini and Bersaglieri—were excellent and as good as any soldiers the Austrians had. The only poor caliber men in the army were those from southern Italy—a region sadly neglected by the Italian government. The southerners were largely uneducated peasantry with little allegiance to the central government. As the long and bloody battles of the Isonzo were to show, the Italian troops were still essentially a militia army.  

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9 Eduard Fröhlich, Der Kampf um die Berge Tirols in österreichischer und italienischer Darstellung (Bregenz: self-published, 1932), p. 190. This book contains an excellent survey of the various types of Italian mountain troops.

10 Falls, Caporetto, pp. xviii-xix.
soldier did not lack courage, even if he did lack leadership. An Austrian general paid the following tribute to a group of Alpini: "they were heroes and no armies have produced better ones."\(^{11}\)

Although the nominal commander of the Italian army was the king, its real leader was General Luigi Cadorna. He was considered to be an excellent organizer, but possessed few other redeeming qualities. Cadorna was aloof, arrogant, and incapable of getting along with able subordinates. His strategy of constant, brutal, frontal attacks on the Austrians for the major part of the war was an indication of his lack of imagination—a flaw shared by many other commanders in the First World War.\(^ {12}\) He shared other failings with men such as the British commander General Douglas Haig and the French commander General Joseph Joffre, the worst of which was his complete inability to understand the psychology and motivations of the common soldier.\(^ {13}\) This failing more than any other contributed to the erosion of Italian morale during the long battles of the Isonzo and made the Italian soldiers subject to the panic that set in during the Caporetto offensive.

If the Austrians were outnumbered on the Italian front, they had one immense advantage: the terrain. In view of military aims,
the war between the two countries was fought in some of the most
difficult terrain in Europe. River valleys and precipitous moun-
tains eased the task of the defenders, though both attacker and de-
fender were plagued by the lack of usable roads and railroads in the
mountains.

After Italy's initial thrust against the small Austrian hold-
ing forces in 1915 the front lines stabilized along the Isonzo Riv-
er. The numerical inferiority of the Austrians forced them to re-
main on the defensive, and Germany's "peremptory advice" that Rus-
sia was to be the main objective of actions by the Central Powers
precluded the bolstering of Austrian forces in Italy. The "Croat
Thickhead," General Boroevič, who was put in command of the Austrian
forces along the Isonzo, gave his famous order that determined the
nature of the Isonzo battles and the course of the war in Italy:
"troops should construct positions, place obstacles in front of them,
and remain there." In spite of appalling casualties and hardships
the Austrian troops did remain there for two and a half years.

Only once prior to 1917 did the Austrians attempt an offensive
in Italy. In 1916 Conrad decided to carry out one of his pet ideas:

14 Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p. 99. For a good, short
description of the early warfare on the Italian front during 1915 in
English, see Ludwig Jedlicka, "The Italian Front: Opening Battles,"
History of the First World War, Vol. II, No. 16 (n. d.), pp. 894-
99. Eduard Fröhlich, Der Kampf um die Berge Tirols, is useful, as is
Anton Pitreit, Das Pöckengebiet im Weltkrieg (Bregenz: Kärntner
National Comradeship Union, 1932). Luigi Villari, The War on the
Italian Front, gives the Italian viewpoint. Appropriate sections of
the official histories as well as the vast selection of unit histor-
ies can also be consulted for specific areas. Fritz Weber, Das Ende
der alten Armee (Salzburg: "Das Bergland-Buch," 1959) must be read
even if it must be taken with a grain of salt.

an attack in the Trentino region. Such an offensive had several features to recommend it. First, it would avoid attacking the main bulk of the Italian armies along the Isonzo River. Second, a success would allow the Austrians to debouch onto the Italian plain, far behind the armies on the Isonzo, leaving the Italian army in a gigantic trap. Its disadvantages were that to carry it out five divisions would have to be drawn from the Russian front and that the terrain in the mountains was not conducive to attack.

Prince Charles was put into command of the corps assigned to conduct the main attack, and to offset his lack of experience at this level of command, he was given the best staff that was available. At first, the attack went very well and considerable ground was taken, but then the impetus slowed and Charles showed some hesitation at expending the lives necessary for a further advance. Although the Italians had become so worried that they considered withdrawing from the Isonzo, the slackening pressure heartened them and they decided to hold their positions. Any question about renewing the offensive was quashed by events in Russia, however; General Alexei Alexandrović Brussilov launched a major offensive, smashing into the area vacated by the Austrian divisions that had been sent to Italy. The Austrians were forced to beg for German aid, end the offensive in Italy, and give up the hope of further gains there for some time.  

Throughout the 1915-1917 period, the Italians eschewed the Trentino region as too difficult for the attacker and concentrated their offensive efforts on the Isonzo River. In a series of battles known as the eleven battles of the Isonzo, the Italians suffered staggering casualties and gained very little territory or advantage. Italian losses on the Austro-Italian front ran considerably higher than Austrian casualties, but Austria was also suffering losses on other fronts. By the end of February, 1917, the Austrians estimated that the Habsburg army had lost over 3,000,000 men dead, missing, captured, or too sick or wounded for further combat.  

After the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, the Central Powers were forced into reconsidering their strategy on the Italian front. Austrian losses were heavy, a good deal of ground was lost, and, most important, there was a noticeable decrease in morale in the army. One of the commanders remarked that every "soldier knows that conclusive success can only be obtained through an attack, that only the refreshing sensation of an attack, hurrying from success to success, can preserve the combat effectiveness and morale of the troops." The converse of this statement was also true, he added, and, "ennervating, continuous positional warfare can finally grind down the strength of the best soldiers."  

There was a growing realization that the Isonzo battles amounted to "slow suicide" for Austria and that an alternative had to be found.  

17 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 142.  
18 Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, p. 12.  
Acting on the principle that an offensive promising any degree of success was preferable to bleeding to death, General Arz decided that a new Italian offensive must be forestalled by an Austrian one and on August 25, 1917, he proposed an attack in the Flitsch-Tolmein area. 20

In January, 1917, Conrad had proposed a two-pronged offensive to be conducted with German assistance. German and Austrian units were to make a major demonstration in the Flitsch-Tolmein area. After the attention of the Italians had been sufficiently diverted, Archduke Eugene was to launch an attack with the main body of the German and Austrian forces in the Trentino, in the area of the Seven Communities. 21 These two forces were to trap and surround the Italian army that was deployed mainly along the Isonzo and in the north Italian plain. During the fall of 1917, Conrad, now in a subordinate role, again broached this plan but the new chief of Staff, Arz, and his operations chief, Waldstätten, rejected it as too grandiose for the resources at the disposal of the Dual Monarchy. 22 Implicit in this reasoning was the desire to make the Italian campaign a strictly Austrian one and to avoid asking for German help.

Conrad's detractors have tended to consider his preoccupation with the Trentino as an area for offensive operations as merely a fixation with no redeeming features. They point to the failure of


21 Ibid., p. 222.

22 Ibid., p. 232. See also Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 130.
the 1916 offensive, the lack of success during the "Christmas Battles" of 1917-1918, and his inability to achieve a breakthrough during the June Battles of 1918 as decisive proof of the basic fallacy of his reasoning. This argument, however, ignores the fact that none of Conrad's basic preconditions were ever met in any of the three attacks. While some blame can attach to Conrad for his decision to launch the 1916 offensive even though his own requirement for numbers of troops was not met, such a criticism is not valid for the latter two engagements since he no longer had complete control over operational matters. The failure of the latter two battles did not stem so much from their planning by Conrad as from the Armeeoberkommando's decision to have Conrad execute his attacks without the men, guns, or supplies that he considered necessary for success.

Conrad's plan for the autumn offensive of 1917 in Italy was the only one that had the potential for decisive success. His belief in the feasibility of the plan was shared by a number of German officers both before and after the event. The Armeeoberkommando, however, dismissed Conrad's ideas as merely another return to his obsession with the Trentino. Instead, they continued planning for an offensive which they believed would have only a limited effect.

Another reason for the dismissal of Conrad's plan may have been that General Arz had his own fixation about the ideal region for an offensive. Arz had participated in a major war game in which he had "commanded" an Italian corps attacking in the area of Flitsch-Tolmein. Struck by the apparent danger to his left flank, he later proved to his own satisfaction that an Austro-Hungarian offensive in
this sector would pose a very grave threat to the Italians on the lower Isonzo. A preliminary study of the military geography convinced the Armeereiberkommando that the Isonzo would not prove to be a major obstacle.

Though the lower Isonzo itself was no grave hindrance to the attacking forces, the Italian defenses behind the river were formidable. The eleven battles of the Isonzo and the subsequent minor advances had led to the construction of an immensely thick belt of trenches and static defenses. The Flitsch-Tolmein area appeared more attractive for an offensive than a thrust directly across the lower Isonzo because the defenses there had not proliferated as they had down the river. A second factor militating in favor of Flitsch-Tolmein was that the Austrians had managed to retain a bridgehead across the river there. The final major feature favoring this region was that the natural line of advance after a breakthrough would be towards the southwest, enfilading the entire network of Italian defenses on the lower part of the river.

Once the offensive itself and the area of attack had been decided upon, the next major problem was finding the troops necessary to carry it out. Since there were insufficient Austrian divisions in Italy, either a number of Austrian units would have to be sent

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23 Arz, Kampf und Sturz der Kaiserreich, p. 221.


25 Austria, Army, Isonzo Front Study Commission, Bericht ad A. O. K. Op. Nr. 58400 (n. p.: n. p., 1917). This is a short text with photographs and appendices. Although it does not appear to be a formal publication, it is bound and kept in the library, rather than the documents section, of the Viennese Kriegsarchiv.
to Italy from some other front, or German units had to participate in the campaign—an expedient which, except for the minor role played by the German Alpine Corps (actually a division) early in the war, had thus far been avoided by both sides. Of these two possibilities, the Austrians greatly preferred the former, and on August 26, 1917, Emperor Charles wrote to William II:

Dear Friend:

The experiences that we have had in the eleventh battle of the Isonzo have raised in me the conviction that we would be forced into the direst straits in an expected twelfth Isonzo battle. . . .

I therefore ask you, dear friend, to persuade your leading generals to release Austro-Hungarian divisions from the Eastern front by relieving them with German troops. You will certainly understand it if I lay great store in leading only my own troops in the offensive against Italy. My entire army calls the war against Italy 'our war.' From youth, every officer has had instilled in him by his father the emotion, the yearning in his breast to fight against our traditional enemy. If German troops were to help in the Italian theater, it would have a depressing and crippling effect on their enthusiasm. Only German artillery, particularly heavy caliber, would be greeted as welcome help in the Italian theater by me and my army. . . .

In true Friendship,

Karl²⁶

In his reply on September 1, 1917, William II informed the Austrian emperor that the only troops that Germany had readily available were the strategic reserves which were needed on the Western front. The German commanders were unwilling to commit these troops to front line duty in Russia for an unknown length of time. As an alternative, William suggested that he and the army would be willing to send these troops to Italy to participate in a powerful offensive. William's language was polite, but it was also evident that he was

²⁶Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 171.
refusing Charles' request. He ended the letter:

You may be assured that jubilation broke out not only in my army but in all of Germany when news arrived that German troops, alongside your brave Isonzo fighters, would deal a body blow to the oathbreaking Italians. God grant that the day is nearing.

In true Friendship,

William 27

Charles' reply shows none of the pique that might be expected from such a summary rejection of his stated wishes. In fact, there is no indication that he had ever wished otherwise.

Dear Friend,

Your letter, conveyed to me by Colonel Bstorff, filled me with double joy, first, because I see for us the opportunity to wound the Italian enemy deeply by means of a powerful offensive, and second, because you so rightly respected my wish to undertake this operation only with Austro-Hungarian troops. I must accept your statement of the necessity of keeping an operative reserve, and I hope to see our united strength pressing forward victoriously against the malicious enemy.

With warm greetings,

Charles 28

Behind the "truest friendship" and "warm greetings" were developing strains in the relationship of the two nations which polite phrases could not entirely hide. Charles had several reasons for wanting to keep German troops out of the Italian theater of operations, most of them political or personal. First, the Austro-Hungarian army had somewhat of an inferiority complex in regard to the German army. All of the successes on the Eastern front had been brought about either by the two armies working in conjunction or by the Germans alone. The Austro-Hungarian army had failed to achieve

27 Ibid., pp. 172-73.
28 Ibid., pp. 173-74.
any notable victory on their own and in several instances, such as the Carpathian campaigns of the winter of 1914-1915 and the Brussilov offensive of 1916, had to call on the Germans to save dangerous situations. In Italy, on the other hand, the Austrians had managed to hold off the Italians on their own and, while they had achieved no major offensive victories, the partial early success of the 1916 attack in the Trentino convinced them that they at least had a good chance of defeating the Italians without German aid.\textsuperscript{29}

A second consideration was the influence of the Empress Zita. A daughter of the Bourbon-Parma dynasty, she consistently exhibited a dislike for the imperial Germans and a preference for reaching some kind of an accommodation with the Entente Powers. Although her overt actions were above reproach, enough was known about her private beliefs for some of the Dual Monarchy's leading figures to mistrust her intentions. This mistrust was widely enough shared that the Italians could take advantage of it by referring in propaganda leaflets to her "pro-Italian" sympathies.\textsuperscript{30} Zita was able to wield considerable influence over her husband and there is little doubt that she consistently urged him to disassociate himself and the Dual Monarchy from German influence and war aims.

A final, although less convincing, reason for wishing to keep German troops out of Italy was that Austria seemed to believe that the Entente Powers would be more likely to keep British, French, and

\textsuperscript{29} A common joke throughout Central Europe states that on the seventh day of creation God rested and surveyed His work. On the eighth day He created the Italian army so that the Austrians would have an army they could beat.

American troops out of Italy in return. This was a highly unlikely supposition since the Entente Powers could not afford to see Italy defeated under any circumstances. If the situation seemed grave in Italy, Entente troops would be dispatched there to attempt to retrieve the situation whether German troops were actively fighting on the front or not.

For her own part, Germany had a number of reasons for deciding to take part in an Italian campaign. The German Supreme Command had come to the conclusion that Austria-Hungary was weakening rapidly and German troops were necessary to stiffen the Dual Monarchy's resolve; nearly incidentally they also felt that it was high time to do something to cripple the Italian army. German actions throughout the upcoming campaign were to indicate that they really did not seriously expect to achieve a decisive victory against the Italians. According to a postwar evaluation, the Flitsch-Tolmein offensive was "originally conceived as only a strategic attempt to better the position." In other words, the German Supreme Command was treating the offensive as a large scale line straightening operation. This rather limited conception was to prove a severe handicap to the generals in charge of the offensive.

In retrospect, it seems slightly strange that the Germans were unwilling to trust their ally to conduct an offensive for such a limited objective. The problem was that the German commanders simply did not trust the abilities of the Austro-Hungarian army. A general

\[31\] Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuscripts, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 21, Rudolf Kizzling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen Front. Rückschau u. Erkenntnisse für die Zukunft," p. 28.
rule had been laid down by General Falkenhayn, and his successors were not wont to change it:

If. . .[the Austrians] were to do useful service in big offensive actions, then care had to be taken to use them side by side with the Germans, and to let the latter do the real work of the attack. . . . Where this was not done, the deviation from the rule has bitterly avenged itself. 32

Beyond this, however, there was one more overriding factor that the Germans must have had in mind when they decided to send German soldiers to Italy, although they did not mention it. As long as German troops formed the cutting edge of any offensive, the German Supreme Command retained virtual if not actual control over the operation. Had the German emperor agreed to Charles' request and allowed Austrian divisions to be withdrawn from the line in Russia and replaced by German troops, Germany would have lost the initiative in several sets of circumstances.

First, the Italian campaign would have been purely Austrian in nature and the Germans would only be able to "suggest" that it be ended or its course altered or modified. If the Austrians were able to retain complete control of the campaign, the Germans would be reduced to the role of a subordinate—a role that the German command was unwilling to play. There was more than arrogance in the German decision, however. The second factor concerned Germany's strategic reserve. If Germany allowed these reserves to be tied down, holding the line in Russia, the divisions could not swiftly disengage and react with enough strength to a threatened breakthrough on the Western front. By employing the reserve offensively in Italy

32 Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p. 64.
Germany would be able to retain a certain amount of flexibility. Defensively, troops would be spread out over a long stretch of line, and withdrawal would leave a huge gap. With the divisions grouped for an offensive, the Germans could withdraw their own units and there would still be a sufficient number of Austrian troops available to fill in the gap and set up a defense. The third factor was simply the fact that with German units acting as the spearhead of an offensive, the German Supreme Command would retain effective control of operations even if the German divisions were theoretically under Austrian orders. If Germany decided at any point that the offensive should be terminated, all they had to do was halt or withdraw their divisions, and the offensive would come to a halt. These three factors make evident why Germany politely insisted that German units participate in an offensive against Italy.

As was indicated in his letter of September 5, 1917, Charles suddenly dropped his insistence on keeping the affair a purely Austrian one and responded as if the matter had only symbolic importance. His advisors must have convinced him of the dangers of going it alone. Although there was little reason to believe that a purely Austrian campaign would fail, the presence of German troops would make the risk of setback minimal. Not only would German assistance serve as a moral tonic for the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, but it would also be a great psychological blow to the Italians. The fact that few soldiers from Germany had fought in Italy made them something of an unknown factor to the average Italian trooper; all that the Italians knew about the Germans was that these were the men who had overrun Serbia and Romania in a matter of months, and who had practically brought the legendary Russian steamroller to destruction
while containing the French and English armies on the Western Front. There seems to have been a tendency among the Italian rank and file to regard the presence of German soldiers as meaning certain defeat. On a more practical level, the Germans had advantages other than the psychological ones. Their divisions had much greater numbers of organic artillery and machine guns than equivalent Austrian divisions. All of these factors worked together to make acceptance of German aid more palatable to Charles.

For their part, the Germans accepted both the principle of Austrian command in the campaign and the Austrian plan of operation. Cooperation between the two allies went very smoothly, thanks to the abilities and compatibility of the two commanders assigned to conduct the main attack: General Otto von Below, commander of the 14th German army, and General Alfred Krauß, who was in command of the Austrian I corps. General von Below was a man gifted with leadership ability and a fine sense of tactical and strategic operation. He was not a military scholar but the troops of his 14th army were in the forefront of the development and employment of the technique of infiltration tactics which was to restore some of the mobility to offensive operations that had been lost during the course of the First World War.

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34 Gunther von Einem, Otto von Below, ein deutscher Heerführer (Munich: J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1929), provides a suspect, but when used with caution satisfactory, portrait of von Below. Konrad Leppa, General der Infanterie Alfred Krauß, ein Vorbild für Volk und Heer (Munich: J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1932), should be read with equal reservations.
These methods had first been tested in the Riga offensive in Russia. They were now to be employed in the offensive in Italy as a last dress rehearsal before the Germans employed them on the Western front in 1918. Von Below was also fortunate in his choice of subordinates, who ranged from the extremely capable General Konrad Krafft von Delmensingen to the then unknown Major Erwin Rommel, who was to initially distinguish himself in the Caporetto campaign.

Alfred Krauß, though not well known outside Austria, was an equally gifted soldier and a superior military scholar. He was well liked in the Austro-Hungarian army and respected for his theoretical writings. Krauß was widely considered to be the best candidate to succeed Conrad in the chief of staff post, but he did not get the appointment due to some very highly placed political opposition and Charles' aversion to another strong-willed chief of staff rather than to any doubt about Krauß' abilities. The Caporetto campaign was to demonstrate that Krauß was one of the finest battle commanders of the First World War, a man who fully understood the need for mobility and the implications of a war of movement long before most of his contemporaries.  

Krauß and Below hit it off from the beginning. They understood one another and shared a similar view of the upcoming battle and the way it should be conducted. This cooperative spirit and

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35 Alfred Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, is an excellent account of the Caporetto campaign, and if read in conjunction with his article "Führertum," and his book, Theorie und Praxis in der Kriegskunst (Munich: J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1935), one can gain an understanding not only of his theory of warfare but of how "modern" much of his thinking was. Krauß' writing is refreshing because, as opposed to the books of many other military men, his style is not turgid or bombastic and he is completely willing to admit it when he made a mistake in judgement.
mutual understanding of each other's thought processes went far towards ensuring the eventual success of the battle.

There was originally some uncertainty as to how much support the Germans intended to provide since their army had relatively few troops skilled in mountain warfare, but by September 17, their plans were complete. The orders issued that day stated that:

the German 14th army, six German and two imperial and royal divisions, were to sally forth from the Tolmein bridgehead in an attack against the Italians, with the goal of throwing the Italians back to the plain around Cividale, and, if all goes well, to the Tagliamento. 36

In the original plan, Krauß' I corps, composed of three Austro-Hungarian divisions with the German Jäger division in reserve, was to cooperate with the main attack by making a subsidiary thrust against the Italians from the vicinity of Flitsch. Krauß, however, had more grandiose ideas and was able to convince General von Below that the I corps should have a major role in the campaign beyond the "assigned objectives," which were positions in the area of Mt. Matajur. Krauß was now given a carte blanche to carry out his attack and he began to issue instructions. The advancing units must "know that the greatest success depends on their quick and energetic advance. They may not give the broken enemy the time to prepare an orderly defense." To make sure that subordinate commanders could not take refuge in a lack of orders from above to excuse a failure to exploit any advantage, Krauß continued, "if the advance succeeds as planned, the divisions cannot count on receiving precise orders from the group commander. In such case I will expect independent, energetic cooperation of all divisions in accordance with the aims

36 Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, p. 13.
of this directive." 37

Von Below endorsed this plan, commenting, "I understand, you will overrun the Italians and then keep them on the run." 38 Krauß was satisfied to know that Below backed his plan, but was even happier when he discovered that his own soldiers understood his intentions. He happily reported overhearing a conversation between two of his infantrymen from the 7th Kärtner regiment, one explaining to the other: "you know we have to overrun the Dagoes directly on the first day and never let them stop; we must always keep our bayonets up their asses." 39

Preparations for the offensive were accompanied by a number of deception schemes. In late September various units of the German Alpenkorps entered the Austrian lines in the Tirol in order to give the impression that the offensive was to come there. General von Below made a highly conspicuous trip to the Tirol for the same purpose. 40 The Austrian line around Flitsch had originally been occupied by the 55th Bosnian-Herzegovinan division; so when the 22nd Schützen and Edelweiß divisions moved into position during the nights of October 12-15 they were issued fezzes, and muezzin still called for morning and evening prayer. 41

As was usual on the Italian front, the secret buildup of men,

37 Ibid., pp. 28-33.
38 Ibid., p. 24.
39 Ibid., p. 33.
41 Ibid., p. 46.
guns, and supplies was nearly as difficult as the battle itself. For instance, it took 2,400 trainloads of supplies to prepare the 14th army alone. All of this matériel then had to be moved by man and draft animal more than nineteen miles to the front. The approach roads were in bad condition, and some of the passes were already receiving snowfall, a further discomfort to troops still clad in their summer uniforms. Heavy artillery pieces up to 305mm had to be moved quietly along roads, at times only 500 yards from the Italian front line. In one place, a 150mm battery had to be set up in a position overlooking the Soca valley at an elevation of 3,300 feet with no roads leading to the site. Since animals could not make the trip with any regularity, the guns had to be dismounted and carried up the rocky slope in sleet and snow at night to escape detection; one gun took eight days to emplace. After this, 3,200 shells weighing 130 pounds apiece also had to be carried up the mountain by hand.

As could be expected, preparations were lagging, and the Austrians were naturally enraged to find that the Germans were attributing the delays to Austrian Gemütlichkeit. \(^{42}\) General Krauß was very careful in his study of the battle to give proper credit and pay tribute to the ordinary labor forces who accomplished these tasks, but were considered "too old" to serve in a combat unit.

Slowly, however, preparations proceeded and final plans and goals were outlined. The main thrust was to be made by the German 14th army from the Tolmein bridgehead with the initial goal of reaching the old border of the empire. If success was great enough

\(^{42}\) Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, pp. 18-23, has an excellent description of the preparations for the offensive and the immense difficulties involved.
to warrant it, the 14th army was then to force a crossing of the Tagliamento River to aid the 2nd Isonzo army's crossing. The Austrian I corps, under Krauß, was to carry out its own offensive while protecting the 14th army's right wing, and the Austrian 1st Isonzo army was to conduct a holding attack on its front in the hope of pinning the Italians facing them in place. It is obvious that at this point there was still little expectation of a major success among the higher commanders. Only Krauß and Below were personally optimistic. The most obvious evidence that the German Supreme Command and the Armeeoberkommando did not share their high hopes was the fact that the armies scheduled to conduct the offensive and advance were not provided with cavalry, armored cars, or any other elements that could press a rapid pursuit.

On October 10, 1917, the chances of a greater success were further diminished when Ludendorff issued orders to General von Below and the Austrians that the German army artillery batteries were to be withdrawn from the Italian front "after the first days of the attack." Then, on October 12, he reiterated his orders about the artillery and further informed the 14th army that they must also reckon with the "imminent" withdrawal of the German infantry units. These hesitations and lack of confidence and commitment made tactical planning a day-to-day affair once the offensive began.

On the other hand, the deceptions and backbreaking labor in the dark appeared to have paid off—the Italians seemed intent on


44 Ibid., p. 36.
misreading the Austrian plans. Casualties among the Italians during the Isonzo battles had generally run much higher than those of the Austrians, and the morale in the Italian army was at a low ebb. There were signs of a growing feeling of hopelessness in the ranks, and pacifist and neutralist sentiments were making a resurgence among the politicians and the populace. Due to the exhaustion of his troops and the morale problem, the Italian commander General Luigi Cadorna had decided to give his army a chance to recuperate from the 11th Battle of the Isonzo. It was this lull in activity that allowed the Central Powers to consolidate their own position and prepare for their own offensive.

Cadorna has been severely criticized for his leadership ability and for his failure during the Caporetto campaign, but the fault was not entirely his. He was able to realize that the Austrians were preparing for an offensive and thus stopped all offensive preparations and ordered the Italian army to reorganize its dispositions for a defensive battle. The major effect of this order should have resulted in a displacement of the Italian artillery to the rear and spreading the guns over a greater depth so that a sudden blow and a small gain of ground on the part of the Austrians would not lead to the capture or destruction of too many guns. This order was not fully carried out, and the artillery remained bunched in two concentrations. One grouping was to the west of the Tolmein bridgehead and

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45 Luigi Villari, *The War on the Italian Front*, pp. 130-40, has a good description of the state of the Italian army.

the other was to the southwest; both were far too near the front. 47

Failure to carry out Cadorna's order was later the subject of much debate in Italy. A parliamentary investigation and post war books by the leading personalities scattered recriminations and accusations hither and yon. The real problem seems to have been that General Capello, commander of the 2nd Italian army, the one most affected by the artillery order, disagreed with Cadorna's decision to remain purely on the defensive. Delays in implementing the order occurred while Capello raised his objections, and then when he finally agreed to carry out the directive he appeared to drag his feet. This dilatoriness was complicated by Capello's falling ill. The end result of all of this was that when the Austrian offensive began the Italians were not prepared for it in spite of warnings. 48

Another problem for the Italians was the timing of the attack and the place it occurred. As early as October 9, 1917, the Italian intelligence services indicated that they expected an Austro-German attack and that the probable date would be during the last week of October. There was a great hesitancy about accepting the truth of this evaluation (which had been obtained from deserters from the Austro-Hungarian army), and "Cadorna and his staff... considered the Austrian counteroffensive over difficult mountain terrain totally impossible." 49

47 Ibid., p. 857. Artillery placed for an offensive must be located as close to the front line as possible so that its range will not be exceeded by advancing troops whom it is supporting. On defense, the artillery should be placed further to the rear so that it will not be in danger from enemy breakthroughs.


To the Austrians, there seemed no chance that the attack would come as a surprise to the Italians. Too many of the preparations had to be carried out within view of Italian observers and they could not count on the Italians' being fooled by the various deceptions. It seemed that the last chance for surprise was lost on the eve of the offensive when two Romanian officers and one Czech officer deserted to the Italians. One of the Romanians was a battalion commander who took with him a detailed plan of operations. The Italians evidently decided to ignore his report as too unreliable if not an outright plant. It is difficult to say who was the most astounded, the Italians by the offensive in accordance with intelligence estimates, or the Central Powers by the fact that the Italians appeared to have been caught by surprise.

On the eve of the offensive, the troops were finally given the details and exact timing of the attack. Enthusiastically, the Austrians moved up into their jump off positions, thinking of "booty and 'requisitioning.'" A German Jäger officer rejoiced that "German divisions advance at the side of Austrian corps to battle against their onetime ally. It was a case of giving the enemy the proper answer to his oath-breaking, to his prized sacro egoismo." All looked forward to the hope that their two and a half years of misery on the Isonzo were about to end.

50 Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, p. 16.


Night fell on October 23, 1917, cold, foggy, and rainy. The attacking units moved into their jump off positions under the cover of the inclement weather and waited for the dawn. At 0300 the battle was opened by a gas barrage from 300 guns directed at enemy artillery positions and barracks. For the first time on the Italian front the Central Powers used the newest of the terrible war gases, phosgene, and the Italian gas masks proved ineffective against it. The Italian guns answered the opening bombardment, but as the gas began to take effect they fell silent. A brief pause in the bombardment occurred at 0430 as the guns ceased firing, hoping to lull the Italians into believing that the opening barrage was merely a feint—a notion which was quickly dispelled when every artillery piece on the front began to fire. At 0730 the mortars joined in the firing. "Chaos was complete when at 0800 hours two powerful mines exploded in the Italian lines at Monte Rosso and at Monte Mrzli, followed immediately by the attack of the German and Austrian infantry."  

As the day progressed, the weather remained bad, with fog and rain in the mountains and a sirocco on the coast. The planes of both sides were grounded. The effect was much worse on the Italians than the Central Powers, since they were unable to gauge the

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53 Walther Heyendorff, "Der Gaswerferangriff bei Flitsch am 24. Oktober 1917," Militarwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen (1934), (off-print), is a good source for information on the preparation and execution of the gas attack.

54 Pebb, "Caporetto," p. 2,368. Krauß states in, Das Wunder von Karfreit, p. 39, that 0900 was the infantry jump-off time, but Pebb is supported by other sources.

strength or extent of the offensive. The demoralizing effect of the gas and the bombardment was magnified by rumor and the sight of fleeing Italian soldiers. Consequently, during the first day of the attack the Italians were unable to take efficient countermeasures. What was worse, the Italian Supreme Command refused to recognize how desperate the situation was.

Ubiquitous fog was cursed by the advancing soldiers of the Central Powers. Eerie and uncomfortably clammy, it enveloped them, causing them to lose their way, preventing them from receiving artillery support, and sometimes causing their own artillery to fire short into their ranks. In truth, it was their saving grace, laying a protective curtain over their movements. The accepted procedure for the advance of infantry in mountainous terrain was for the attacker to seize the adjacent heights before advancing down a valley. In the interest of speed, Krauß and Von Below ordered their men to make the main advance down the valleys. Under normal circumstances this would have been a dangerous tactic, but the low-lying fog prevented Italian units in the mountain positions from locating the advancing columns and calling in artillery support.

Advancing soldiers found scenes of chaos and destruction. The gas, in particular, had taken a terrible toll of lives; an Italian unit in barracks in a small wash was evidently caught by surprise.


57. Krafft von Delmensingen, Der Durchbruch am Isonzo, Vol. I, p. 54. After this experience, Krauß began to advocate the usage of valley routes during an advance, but his arguments were not accepted. Many Austrian commanders did not learn from the Caporetto campaign. Although the fog served as an excellent masking device, many Austrian commanders during the June battles tried to blame the fog for all of their problems; they had not learned to make use of it.
and all 500-600 of them died, victims of gas. Resistance in the valleys was slight; the demoralized Italians surrendered easily. Positions on mountain tops and slopes escaped the brunt of the bombardment and the effect of the gas shells, so their defenders were more tenacious. They were hampered by the thick mist, however, and bewildered to find Austro-Hungarian and German soldiers emerging from the fog behind them, and soon they began to surrender. The success of the first day went far beyond the most hopeful expectations of the Central Powers. Nearly all of the initial objectives were taken. By midnight the furthest advanced units of the Central Powers had penetrated the Italian defenses to a depth of seventeen miles. The German 12th division had taken 15,000 prisoners and 100 guns, and the Austro-Hungarian 50th division, 7,000 prisoners and 90 guns. Units of Krauß' corps had advanced nearly as far and had taken 2,600 prisoners. There were signs promising an even greater success the next day: the Italians had shown no signs of being able to form a coherent defense, and furthermore they were demonstrating a strange lassitude, seemingly hoping that the following dawn would bring them some undefined relief.

Their pursuers, however, did not give them a chance to recover, the chase continuing through the night. Victory was a powerful tonic, and the soldiers of the Central Powers were able to keep going with only a few hours of rest. A poet in a Jäger battalion later wrote of the euphoria of that first night of success:

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58 Heyendorff, "Der Gaswerferangriff bei Flitsch," p. 316.
60 Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, pp. 39-41.
Still we see the villages' flaming light,
And Death laughs, mocking and cold,
In our victory-pride faces.\textsuperscript{61}

For the Austrian foot soldiers the advance was more than just another battle or even another victory. Two and one half years on the Isonzo had exacted a heavy physical and mental toll on their resources. Whether in the ice on the mountains or on the waterless Karst Plateau, life had been an endless round of enduring artillery bombardments, fending off the attacks of a numerically and materially superior enemy, and subsisting on the cold and meager rations that could be brought into the forward lines. Finally, the men were out of the trenches and moving; they had struck a blow at their tormentors and were now advancing into the enemy's homeland.

We may be drenched, but sing and be happy!
There, below, waiting for us somewhere
Are soft, warm beds and sweet wine
As we march deep into Italy's plain.\textsuperscript{62}

The thought of reaching the Italian plain and its rumored riches in foodstuffs was nearly as great a spur to the advancing men as "victory" or "fatherland" or all of the other insubstantial wraths of patriotism. For some time rations had not been plentiful in the Austrian forces, and the rush to get men, guns, and ammunition into position prior to the attack had made the situation even worse.\textsuperscript{63} To the joy and great surprise of the troops, the Italian

\textsuperscript{61} Jacob Baxa, \textit{Alpen in Feuer. Mit den Kärntner Achterjägern an der italienischen Front} (Klagenfurt: Artur Kollitsch, n. d.), p. 23.

\textsuperscript{62} Baxa, "Herbstoffensive, 1917," in \textit{ibid.}, p. 22.

hinterland was the paradise that had been promised. "The greatest joy, however, was the food supplies which we only knew about from memory. Chocolate, coffee, tea, butter, the finest meat, fish, and sausage preserves, olive oil, heavenly marmalade, many entire wagon loads."  

At times the pursuit of the fleeing Italian army was hindered by the unwillingness of the soldiers to leave behind food and drink that they had not seen since the war began. There was little plundering of civilian homes since the great mass of supplies left behind by the Italian army fulfilled the wants and needs of the hungry men. There was danger too—among the litter were Italian arms and war supplies. To the dismay of unwary soldiers, the Austrians found out that the Italians had a type of hand grenade that looked like the cans that the monarchy preserved meat in. Several casualties were caused by these exploding "cans" when the soldiers attempted to open them.  

Despite all hindrances, the pursuit went forward. Italian morale was failing. As early as the 25th of October the Austrians were able to send 1,500 prisoners to the rear without a guard, and, in another incident, 120 Italians surrendered to seven men.  

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64 Nugel, Siegestage deutscher Jäger in Italien, p. 46. See also Jacob Baxa, Geschichte des k. u. k. Feldjägerbataillons Nr. 8 1808-1918 (Klagenfurt: Verlag Carinthia and 8th Jäger Comrade's Union, 1974), p. 559.  


the 26th Montemaggiore fell to units of Krauß's I corps. This meant that the last major mountain barrier between the Austrians and the rear areas of the Italian armies on the Isonzo had fallen. Cadorna now had no choice but to order the entire army to retreat behind the Tagliamento River.\textsuperscript{67} Air reports reaching the headquarters of the Central Powers indicated that the Italian retreat was becoming highly disorganized, and that in the words of the chief of staff of the 14th German army, the situation seemed to be progressing towards a "catastrophe" for Cadorna.\textsuperscript{68} Still, all the Italians were not giving up so easily. The Edelweiß division stormed Musi, which was defended by only one Alpini battalion, and, although they overwhemed the defenders, the Italians did not surrender until 400 of the men in the unit were dead and most of the rest wounded.\textsuperscript{69}

Though the situation looked bright for the Germans and Austrians, the battle was not yet completely won. The Italians had decided to defend the Tagliamento River, which initial reports had described as a "strong military obstacle."\textsuperscript{70} And if Krauß and Von Below had been advancing with vigor and determination, the same could not be said about the rest of the Austro-Hungarian army. Boroević's Isonzo armies were expected to pin the Italian units on their front while the main attack was being conducted between Flitsch and Tolmein, but they did not carry out their orders with any great

\textsuperscript{67}Krauß, \textit{Das Wunder von Karfreit}, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{68}Krafft von Delmensingen, \textit{Der Durchbruch am Isonzo}, Vol. I, p. 133.

\textsuperscript{69}Krauß, \textit{Das Wunder von Karfreit}, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{70}Austria, 14th Army, \textit{Kampfraum der 14. Armee}, p. 2.
fervor. In fact, when the Italian 3rd army opposite Boroević's forces began their withdrawal to the Tagliamento, he was caught by surprise and "made no attempt to follow in pursuit." 71 The weather was also a factor in slowing the Austrian advance. From the 27th to the 30th of October there were constant rain storms, turning the roads into muddy trails, slowing and hindering movement. 72

If they had not been so discouraged, the Italians could probably have held the Tagliamento line, but the problem with retreats is that once they have begun, they are very difficult to stop. On November 3, 1917, a Bosnian patrol from Krauß' corps forced a crossing of the river along a partially destroyed bridge. 73 Further down the river, the Germans also managed to get a force across the Tagliamento. With his main line of defense penetrated in two areas before it could even be consolidated, Cadorna felt that he had no other choice than to order a further retreat to the Piave River.

There was little fighting during the next week, as the battle became a marching contest between the two armies. Perhaps because they had more incentive, the Italians won the race and on November 9 the last of their units crossed the Piave River and blew up the bridges behind them. Their defensive line now stretched from the sea to the mountains along the Piave. In the mountains they held

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72 Austria, Tätigkeit der öst.-ung. Fliegerverbände, Appendix 2. See also Nugel, Siegestage deutscher Jäger in Italien, p. 31; and Reich, Gegen Italien mit dem deutschen Alpenkorps, pp. 24 and 25.

73 Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, pp. 60-63.
much the same positions as they had before the offensive had begun. Finally, on November 10 the vanguard of the German 14th army and the Austro-Hungarian 1st and 2nd Isonzo armies also reached the Piave.\footnote{Krafft von Deimeningen, Der Durchbruch am Isonzo, Vol. II, p. 203.}

It became quickly obvious that there was now a new spirit in the Italian ranks. On November 7 Cadorna had been fired and replaced by General Armando Diaz. The change in command was more of a morale booster for the army than a substantive improvement of the situation; Diaz did nothing to alter the plans that Cadorna had drafted for the defense of the Piave. The change in command, however, did work wonders for the spirit of the soldiers. Cadorna had never been a popular leader with the lower ranks or with his direct subordinates. There was hope that Diaz would be more likely to understand their problems and complaints. Too, the weak point in the Italian armies had been the 2nd army, which had been completely destroyed in the Caporetto campaign. The 3rd army, under the Duke of Aosta, had been retreating, but since it had not taken part in any heavy fighting nor been harried by Boroevic’s armies, its morale was still high. In fact, Aosta’s men were somewhat angered by the retreat. The lack of fighting on their part of the front had left them with the impression that there was no need for such a precipitous retreat and they wanted to avenge this "dishonor." The other Italian armies on the mountain front had also not been involved in the debacle and were defending a familiar and very strong position. Around Aosta’s army and the Italian armies in the Tirol, a solid defense could be built on the Piave line. These armies were largely intact and their morale was still high. It was further improved by
the receipt of information that the British and French were dispatch-
ing major reenforcements to Italy. The Italian army and Supreme Com-
mand had recovered their nerve. Although Diaz continued to show
some nervousness about the security of the Piave defenses until De-
cember, it now appeared that the Italians were ready to put up a
stout fight along the river. 75

While the situation was improving for the Italians, their pur-
suers were running into serious difficulties. The advance had come
so far and so fast that supplies had not been able to keep up. 76
The Austrians and Germans could forage for food as they went, but
they could not find suitable munitions and artillery in the fields.
The 14th army was already 100-140 miles from its railheads, and the
available horse and motorized supply columns could only deliver 750
tons of matériel per day. Since the daily munition supplies for
just the 14th army to conduct a major operation was 3,600 tons, it
was obvious that the Central Powers would be unable to conduct an
immediate assault across the Piave. The army calculated that twelve
to fifteen days after reaching the Piave sufficient supplies could
be brought up to conduct intensive offensive operations for only
three days. 77 Minor probes by infantry patrols revealed that the

75 See Falls, Caporetto, p. 90, who states that until early De-
cember, Diaz believed that it might be necessary to retreat to a
line just north of Rome. For further information on the Italian re-
covery at the Piave, see General Cadorna, "The End of a Legend," The
Army Quarterly, Vol. VII, No. 2 (January, 1924); Hugh Dalton, With
the British Guns in Italy: A Tribute to Italian Achievement (London:
Mathuen & Co., Ltd., 1919), pp. 156-57; and Mario Caracciolo, Italien

76 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 130.

77 Krafft von Delmensingen, Der Durchbruch am Isonzo, Vol. II,
p. 237.
Italians had apparently decided to defend the river and that a major effort would be needed to assure a successful crossing. Since this would be impossible before November 30, at the earliest, the 14th army decided to wait, build up supplies, and see if the situation would be improved by an anticipated attack on the mountain front by Conrad's forces.  

Austrian units along the Piave were no better off than the Germans. Although they reached the river on the 9th of October, the destroyed roads and clogged bridges to their rear made it impossible for the munitions columns to keep up with the infantry. Moreover, no heavy artillery was available and there were no bridging trains. An Austrian unit history reported the difficulties faced by the brigade trains as they moved south along the Italian roads. Constant rains had made the roads nearly impassable, and the passage of Austrian vehicles which, due to the rubber shortage, had iron, rather than rubber rimmed wheels, further destroyed the road surfaces. "Horses and pack animals sank up to their stomachs in a sticky quagmire. ... Also the 73rd sank deeper into the quagmire with every step, and every step away from the road led still deeper into a swamp."  

On November 10 the Italians believed that they had only thirty-three divisions defending the Piave line against fifty-five German and Austro-Hungarian divisions. Actually, the odds against the

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78 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 204.
79 Arz, Zur Geschichte des Grossen Krieges, p. 182.
80 Hoen, Geschichte des ehemaligen Egerländer Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 73, p. 525.
Italians were not nearly so great. By November 12 the 2nd Isonzo army had elements of nine divisions on the Piave, but these ranged in strength from a high of 7,700 men to a low of 1,660, and the entire nine divisions could assemble only forty-two batteries of guns, of which eight were heavy and the remainder (about 240) were light. The 1st Isonzo army had eight divisions at the Piave, ranging in strength from a high of 8,000 men to a low of 4,800, plus a total of five field artillery brigades.\(^\text{81}\) Overall the two Isonzo armies were at only 43% of their authorized strength, most of the balance still straggling forward. Since the 14th army could have hardly been in much better shape (especially since its artillery component had been withdrawn immediately after the attack began), it is obvious that there was no chance of forcing a crossing of the Piave for several weeks.

There was also further unnerving news for the Central Powers: their latest intelligence reports indicated that the British and French had sent twenty divisions to Italy—a fresh force comprising 360,000 men and 400 guns. Clearly it was time to regroup on the Piave and wait to see what Conrad could do in the mountains.\(^\text{82}\) The intelligence reports were wrong. The Entente Powers were only sending about half that number of men to Italy, but the Central Powers had no way of knowing this.

As was indicated earlier, Conrad had originally argued that the way to make the fall offensive a complete success was to launch


attacks from both the Trentino and Isonzo areas at the same time, but he had been rebuffed. With the amazing success of the Caporetto offensive, however, the Armeeoberkommando gave him the go-ahead to begin his own attack. Unfortunately, he had been given neither the men nor the supplies which he had requested and so the attack had to be made on a shoestring. Conrad's problems were multiplied by the timing of the offensive. His assault had to begin in mid-November rather than late October, and the weather in the mountains was already beginning to change for the worse.

Conrad scheduled the operation to begin on the 10th of November, but during the night of the 9-10th "snow and ice decked the bulk of the Grappa Massif, which was enshrouded in a frozen fog." Deeper in the mountains, on the Asiago Plateau, the snow fell three feet deep. Conrad's soldiers tried to force their way through the combined resistance of the elements and the Italians and actually gained about three miles before being pushed back to Asiago. In terms of the sacrifice, the gains were slight.

Several more days of fighting produced only casualties and no major gains. Conrad's troops on the Asiago Plateau and Krauß' men, who were attempting to take the Grappa Massif, were faced with storms and blizzards that sapped their strength more than did the enemy. Furthermore, Krauß' men, who had fought their way south from the Isonzo, were down to fifty rifle cartridges per man and only twenty to thirty shells apiece for their already inadequate number

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83 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 182.
of artillery pieces. It was clear that a halt would have to be called in operations. Krauß reported that he could not renew attacks until the first or second week of December; the Germans were unable to renew an attempt to force the Piave until the first week of December. The Caporetto campaign had ground to a halt.

Now the last real chance to keep the Italians off balance faded. While the Central Powers brought their railheads forward and rebuilt their supplies, the Italians were shaking off the last of their jitters and the influx of British and French units began. Twenty divisions did not arrive—only five British and six French divisions—but they were sufficient to restore equilibrium to the situation. In the rear the Italians were taking desperate measures to reform twenty more divisions. For all practical purposes the Caporetto campaign had come to a halt on the Piave, which had become the Italian Marne.

A series of encounters known as the "Christmas Battles" was yet to be fought because the Central Powers were not quite ready to recognize the fact that their easy successes had ended. The battles were bloody and they generally failed to accomplish any worthwhile aims; some regiments were reduced to as few as 350 men out of an original 1,800, all for a few yards of ground. An officer from an Austrian storm company reported that all of his division's storm companies had been combined into one unit consisting of himself as

85 Ibid., pp. 206-07.
86 Falls, Caporetto, pp. 90-91.
the sole officer leading fifteen survivors.\textsuperscript{88} The Central Powers were now forced to recognize the fact that they had reached the end of their string, so they ceased operations.

The Italians have advanced a number of reasons for their defeat during the Caporetto campaign:

1. Scarcity of roads and the poor railroad net behind their front hampered their mobility and delayed their reaction to the offensive.

2. Their men and matériel were deployed for offensive operations rather than a defensive action, and were, therefore, too close to the front and more liable to capture.

3. They had too few reserves.

4. After two and one-half years of war, they had greater skill in offensive battles than defensive ones.

5. Their troops were exhausted from the strains of so many offensives.

6. The nation itself was growing spiritually exhausted after the heavy casualties that had been suffered.

7. The change from the offensive to the defensive preceding the campaign had appeared to the troops to be an omen of weakness.

8. The presence of German troops was a grave psychological blow to the Italian soldiers because they believed the Germans to be much more dangerous and fearsome than the Austrian soldiers whom they were used to fighting.\textsuperscript{89}

One Italian advocate even advanced the theory that it didn't matter if the "hard and bloody strife was carried on at the Isonzo or sixty to a hundred miles further back."\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{88} Otto Gallian, \textit{Monte Asalone 1918} (Graz: Leykam Verlag, 1933), pp. 26-46, gives a good description of the Christmas Battles from a small unit viewpoint.


The Italian Supreme Command, however, could not shrug off the
numerical losses of the battle. Italy had lost 10,000 dead, 30,000
wounded, and 293,942 prisoners of war. Even more discouraging was
the fact that about 400,000 men—presumably deserters who decided
to go home—just disappeared. The losses in materiel were nearly
as bad: 300,000 rifles, 3,000 machine guns, 1,732 mortars, and
3,152 artillery pieces.\footnote{Krauß, \textit{Das Wunder von Karfreit}, p. 66. See also Arz, \textit{Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges}, p. 185.}

These losses would have been more severe had the Central Pow-
ers anticipated the real extent of the success they had achieved.
The long range goals set for the attack had been met in the first
few days of the battle. The initiative of the men and lower ranking
officers, spurred on by leaders such as Krauß and Von Below, were
the wellspring of victory. Their individual actions allowed the
Central Powers to continue the pursuit long after circumstances
seemed to dictate a halt; this pressure kept the enemy off balance
and retreating. It was a matter of success reenforcing itself.

Krauß later admitted that he had made a major mistake in not
requesting mobile forces such as armored cars or horse cavalry until
just before the attack began. His pursuit of the Italians was there-
fore limited to the speed at which a man could walk in the mountains.
He felt that much more could have been accomplished had he and others
shown more foresight.\footnote{Krauß, \textit{Das Wunder von Karfreit}, pp. 52-53.}
The Austrian chief of staff, Arz, agreed
with his assessment.\footnote{Arz, \textit{Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges}, p. 179.}
The greatest success of the Central Powers in Italy was ended. The Battle of Caporetto had dealt a fearful blow to the Italians but they were not knocked out. The Armeeoberkommando now faced the new year of 1918, and they had to begin a new search for victory over the "hereditary foe." A few of the army leaders and Armeeoberkommando officers studied the lessons of the campaign but many other influential officers ignored them. A new theory of mobile tactics had been demonstrated but the failure of many commanders to apply what had been learned caused a split among the officers of the Austro-Hungarian army. In this factional split between the traditionalists and the more modern group lay the basis of a future hesitancy and a fatal weakness. This was only one dispute among many, however, and for the remainder of the war there would be little unity in the army command.
CHAPTER III

PLANNING WITHOUT DIRECTION:
INVITATION TO A WAFFENTANZ

Even before the winter's fighting along the Piave and in the Tirol had died out, it was becoming obvious to the Armeeoberkommando that Austria-Hungary would be forced into making a quick decision as to the strategy the monarchy would pursue during 1918. The Germans were preparing for their great spring offensive on the Western Front, a clash of arms which they hoped would bring the war to a conclusion in 1918. The arrival of American troops in France and the imminent advent of a million more made it apparent that the Central Powers could not hope for a successful ending to the war if it were prolonged past the present year.¹

If the Central Powers hoped to break the deadlock, the spring and summer of 1918 offered the most auspicious time. The surrender of Russia on March 3, 1918, was only the formal consummation of a de facto state of affairs. Russia and Germany had already signed an armistice on December 15, 1917, and from that date the Germans had been able to transfer an increasingly large number of troops from Russia to France.² For the first time in the war, the German armies


on the Western Front were not greatly outnumbered by the Entente armies. Combining this new strength with the recently devised infiltration tactics which had proved so successful in the Riga and Caporetto campaigns and the innovative artillery tactics of Colonel Georg Bruchmüller (nicknamed Durchbruchmüller by the German soldiers), they hoped to be able to deliver a decisive blow.

In evaluating the possible goals of their offensive, the Germans believed that if France were rendered hors de combat, Great Britain would still continue the struggle from her island bastion. On the other hand, they felt that if they could eliminate Great Britain from the conflict, France would then seek an immediate end to the war. The target of the German offensive was therefore to be the juncture of the British and French armies, and its ultimate aim was to destroy the British 5th army, separate the remaining British forces from the main body of the French army, and finally to push the remaining British units into an untenable situation requiring their surrender.\(^3\) The plan was codenamed "Michael," and the date for its implementation was set at late March.

Germany had come to the aid of Austria-Hungary on several different occasions during the campaigns in Russia, and more recently, during the autumn of 1917, they had aided the monarchy in inflicting a terrible defeat on the Italians; now Germany was going to insist that Austria repay these debts. With Hindenburg demanding some sort of aid from the monarchy and Ludendorff urging a "combined effort

\(^3\)Barrie Pitt, *1918: The Last Act* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962), pp. 41-42. The validity of this assumption by the Germans is, of course, open to question.
against the Entente," the Austrians now had to decide how to answer these peremptory requests. The Dual Monarchy immediately agreed to send at least artillery to France, and contributed fifty batteries, primarily heavy guns, and enough ammunition for the early stages of the battle. The dispatch of this artillery was not sufficient to comprise Austria's total contribution, and so the Armeeoberkommando had still to decide the extent of the monarchy's commitment to the German offensive. This decision could only be made, however, after Austria-Hungary decided what its own goals were for 1918.

It is always easy to employ hindsight and make declarations as to the proper course of action the monarchy should have taken. At present it is fashionable among Austrian military historians to state that the condition of the empire in 1918 was so hopeless that it was reckless and unpardonable for Austria-Hungary to pursue any aggressive goals. There is some substantiation for this point of view. Austria-Hungary was indeed beset by countless dangers and any rash action on the part of the monarchy could lead to complete disaster. Both Field Marshal Boroević and his chief of staff Anton Pittreich urged at the time that the empire should remain on the defensive and passively await developments on the Western Front. Most modern historians have adopted this argument.  


Implicit in at least the modern version of this theory is the assumption that the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was doomed by 1918 and that the struggles to maintain it were futile and wasteful of lives and resources. This viewpoint is parochial in that it attempts to judge the actions and decisions of people whose primary goal was the preservation of the empire in terms of the precepts of a citizen of the Austrian Republic. It also ignores the fact that the defeat which in retrospect seems so inevitable did not appear so certain an event to Austria-Hungary’s leaders in 1918.

Statements made by the leaders of the Entente Powers, as well as their action, had made it very clear that the defeat of the Central Powers would result in the breakup of the monarchy. Then, too, if Germany won the war, Austria-Hungary would have to be sure that all of her fences were mended with the giant to the north. Therefore, in order to judge the decisions made in 1918, the situation in that year and the apparent alternatives open to the leaders of the Dual Monarchy must be considered.

It is obvious that any great effort put forth by the monarchy in 1918 was fraught with danger. Another great offensive such as the one at Caporetto, even if successful, might put an intolerable strain on the fabric of the empire. Defeat in such an offensive would be even worse. Any consideration of Austria-Hungary’s planning must start with the thesis, however, that the great majority of the men in command of its armies were still confident of victory. It is an axiom that a good general must be an optimist.⁶

⁶Freytag-Loringhoven, Menschen und Dinge, p. 220.
An obvious place to begin any analysis of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is in its internal and military conditions. Though this question will be discussed later in more detail, it can be said now that there is little disagreement among historians that the empire was faced with threat of near Augæan dimensions. Food for the civilian population was scarce; the normal ration was merely a fraction of the prewar norm. The troops in the front lines and workers in heavy labor occupations received slightly higher rations, but even these were below the amount normally considered the minimum for maintaining good health and normal activity. The nationality problems that were to play so major a role in the destruction of the monarchy were beginning to be severely felt, and many of the nationalities were almost in open revolt. Strikes were spreading throughout the empire, and the resulting dislocations were adversely affecting war production and distribution facilities. Under these circumstances, there is no doubt that it would be highly dangerous for Austria-Hungary to embark on any great military endeavor.

An examination of the alternatives, however, shows that the possible dangers of not doing so were even more daunting. Since Germany had already laid plans for the conduct of the war on the Western Front during 1918, Austrian plans and policies had to conform to the German lead. The Germans were determined on launching a major offensive so the choices open to Austria-Hungary were limited to only two broadly defined possibilities: to aid them or not to aid them.

If Austria chose not to aid the Germans, the monarchy had to face the probability that it would no longer retain its traditional
place in European society no matter which side won the war. In the first place, a passive stance by the dual monarchy during 1918 would make it very difficult for the Central Powers to win the war or even to achieve a peace on other than punitive terms. In the event that the Central Powers did not achieve a favorable result in the war, the Habsburg monarchy was certainly doomed. Public opinion and political opportunism within the Entente camp had by this time forced Great Britain and France to favor openly the breakup of the empire and the formation of independent states by the various nationalities within Austria-Hungary. Consequently, any person loyal to the dynasty and empire was compelled to support any course of action that appeared likely to result in a more favorable outcome to the war.

If it is accepted that the leaders of Austria-Hungary did not really have a viable alternative to victory, the question remains as to whether they could remain quiescent and hope for the Germans to win the war without Austrian help. This option, though urged by Boroević and others, also could not lead to any result favorable to the dual monarchy. Even if Germany were able to win the war on her own, the future of the Habsburg monarchy would remain bleak. Germany would emerge as the undisputed master of the European continent—and the natural arrogance of the Germans towards the monarchy would not be tempered by the memory that in the last climactic battle of the war the Austrians had left them to struggle without aid. Left to share Central Europe and a long border with an arrogant,

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powerful, and contemptuous northern neighbor, Austria would be at best a lackey of the German empire and at worst a puppet state.

This hypothetical exercise is for the purpose of demonstrating that from the viewpoint of Realpolitik the Austrians were left with no reasonable option other than to pursue an aggressive course of action in 1918, regardless of the danger in terms of internal weaknesses. An active policy was the only possibility of avoiding dissolution or domination. Another intangible factor was that the dual monarchy’s prestige would suffer an irremediable blow: it would be cast in the role of a nation which broke the Bundestreue, the same charge that had been leveled against Italy in 1914 and which had aroused the indignation of the peoples of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Faced with the alternatives of possible destruction due to the inability of the nation’s resources to sustain a massive effort, or the fact of destruction due to inaction and its consequences, Austria-Hungary had everything to gain and nothing to lose by agreeing to aid the Germans. The consequences of failure would be no worse than those of failure to act, and the benefits of success could only be obtained by positive action.

Once the decision to act had been made, the next problem for the Armeeoberkommando was to gauge the extent of the aid that the monarchy could give to the Germans and the manner in which it could be best employed. The Germans would probably have preferred that the Austrians send a number of their infantry divisions directly to the Western Front because even if they would be unable to participate directly in the offensive in France, they would be relied upon to defend large stretches of the non-active front. This would
release German units that could be directly employed in the offensive.

Such a course of action would pose a number of problems of both political and military nature. The primary military problem that would arise from the dispatch of Austrian units to the Western Front was the matter of supply. Not only would men and arms have to be transported from Italy and Russia to France, but a complete supply system would also have to be established. The Austrians used a different type of rifle and machine gun than those employed by the Germans and the Austrian artillery was of a different caliber. In order to function in France they would either have to be retrained and reequipped with German weapons or a new and extensive logistics support system would have to be organized, linking Austria with the Western Front—a task that was probably beyond the capacity of the strained Austrian transport system. Such a solution would also require time for implementation, and time was short.

Despite these difficulties, the Austrians might have been able to send infantry to the Western Front had there not existed political objections at home. On March 10, 1918, General von Cramon reported to his headquarters in Spa that the Austrians would refuse to send troops to France because Empress Zita objected to having soldiers of the monarchy directly fighting Frenchmen on French soil.²

A member of the house of Bourbon-Parma, Zita had consistently

demonstrated Francophile tendencies, of which this was only the latest manifestation. According to Cramon, the empress rationalized the presence of Austrian artillery in France as being a more impersonal confrontation than face to face combat between infantrymen of the two countries. Furthermore, she viewed the presence of French troops in Italy as a matter beyond the control of the dual monarchy since a decision of the French government had sent them there. Zita's viewpoint was very idealistic, but in an era of total war it was an anachronism. As will become apparent later, her stances concerning the war were so at odds with the temper of the times and public opinion within the monarchy that they tended to destroy the confidence of the nation in the loyalty of the empress to Austria-Hungary.

Another, more minor, political problem was that Charles feared that the commitment of Austrian troops to the Western Front might imply to the Allies that Austria-Hungary totally supported German war aims. Since Charles did not want his country identified with some of the more extreme German demands, it was better to remain somewhat aloof from the main confrontation in France, concentrate on the more popular (among his subjects) war in Italy, and do nothing that might endanger the covert peace moves that he was attempting to carry out.9

A nearly inexorable fate was driving Austria-Hungary to pursue an active and aggressive policy in Italy. Unable to contribute effectively to the war on the Western Front, Austria could hope to

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9Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 28.
deliver another smashing blow to the Italians. Even if total victory were denied the Austrians, they could pose so serious a threat to Italy that the Entente Powers would have to send their own troops to northern Italy to shore up the defenses. If French and British divisions were diverted from the main front in France, or if the Americans were compelled to send large numbers of fresh soldiers to the Italian theater, German victory in France would become more probable and Austria's obligations to the Germans would be fulfilled. Although it was clear that the Austrians could not begin any campaign in time to act in concert with the initial German attack in March, there was every reason to believe that such an offensive could be mounted in time to make the subsequent summer battle a success. 10

Thus far, the argument has been advanced in this study that the Austro-Hungarian decision to pursue an aggressive course of action during 1918 and to carry out an offensive in Italy as the main goal of this policy was a rational political choice based on the alternatives facing the empire. To state that this choice was politically rational is not, however, to say that it was militarily prudent. The question of the ability of the dual monarchy to carry out an extensive military operation during 1918 must also be examined.

A factor which greatly complicates such an analysis is the fact that the Austro-Hungarian army was in the midst of a reorganization. In one sense, this change was both necessary and long

overdue. Austro-Hungarian units had proved to be inadequately equipped with machine guns and artillery, and unable to deal with the demands of modern warfare. The infantry divisions were still armed and organized for the older methods of combat and were unable to adapt to the new infiltration tactics. The success of the German units during the Caporetto campaign was sufficient to demonstrate the inadequacies of the imperial and royal army, and so the decision was made to remodel the Austro-Hungarian army along German lines. The number of artillery batteries assigned to an infantry division was increased so that the newly organized infantry division contained two field artillery regiments, a mountain artillery battery, and a mortar battalion, nearly doubling the number of artillery pieces available within each division. More men were equipped with machine guns or the new machine pistols, and specially trained storm battalions were formed within each division and drilled in the new tactics. Finally, the increased firepower within the division made it possible to reduce the size of the division while maintaining an equal combat effectiveness. Each regiment lost one of its battalions of infantry, so that the new infantry division had twelve battalions of infantry and one specialized storm battalion instead of the old arrangement of sixteen infantry battalions. The various technical and support units were also increased in size and number.

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11 Austria, Army, Neuorganisation während des Kriegs, Orientierungsbehelf (Vienna: k. k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1917). See also Lucas, Austro-Hungarian Infantry, pp. 26-27 and 31; and Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 258-59. This description has been simplified of course. The army went through several reorganizations during the war, and this was only the last. Although it was planned to reorganize the army in 1917, no practical steps were taken in this direction until 1918.
While this reorganization was theoretically sound, the manner in which it was implemented appears to have been irresponsible. The fourth battalion which was "lost" when the regiments were reduced in size was to be combined with other "fourth" battalions in order to form new regiments and ultimately new divisions. Likewise, the various artillery batteries had to be shuffled among the divisions in order to form the new, strengthened artillery brigades. The plan transferring the units to their new parent headquarters was apparently devised by a bored staff officer whose lack of imagination was surpassed only by his paucity of cognitive awareness. Heavy artillery units that had been emplaced in mountain positions with back-breaking labor were withdrawn and moved to new locations; battalions criss-crossed paths as they attempted to locate their new regiments. In at least one instance, a battalion moving from the Piave to its new unit in the Tirolese mountains met a battalion moving from the Tirol to its new unit on the Piave. The monarchy's transportation system, which had already been strained to its limits in order to supply the Caporetto offensive, was reduced to chaos. Coal reserves, already in short supply, were badly depleted to fuel the trains carrying the various units on their odyssey. "The trust of the troops in the highest leadership was not strengthened by this activity," was the acid comment of one Austrian general.\footnote{Krauß, \textit{Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage}, p. 247.}

In addition to the confusion generated by the transportation crisis, another problem confronted the empire: the Hungarians exploited the war-induced crises by making a renewed bid for more
autonomy in military affairs. In January of 1918 the Hungarian government submitted an army reform plan that included establishing a separate Hungarian army at all levels, i.e., the Honvéd and Hungarian Landsturm would remain under the direct control of the Hungarian government, and those common army regiments raised in the Hungarian portions of the empire, but hitherto under imperial control, would in the future be answerable only to Budapest.\(^{13}\)

This proposal, of course, met with extreme opposition from the army and the imperial government and was quickly shunted aside. There may have been some repercussions, however, because shortly after the proposal was quashed there was a new food supply crisis when Hungary announced that it could not meet the expected grain delivery quotas allocated to the Austro-Hungarian army. This action set off a new round of feuding and recriminations between the two halves of the empire that was only abated by the dismissal of Graf Johann Hadik, the Hungarian minister of food and agriculture, and his replacement by Prince Ludwig Windischgrätz.\(^{14}\) Although the immediate crisis was averted, this new obstructionism on the part of Hungary during a time of troubles boded ill for the future.

It was indicative that the Hungarians chose to use their position as the breadbasket of the empire as a bargaining lever because it emphasized the pressing problems within the dual monarchy caused by the shortage of foodstuffs. The British blockade of the

\(^{13}\) Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 210-15.

Central Powers was making itself felt in a drastic fashion and the Austro-Hungarians were being forced more and more into depending on the produce of conquered territories to feed the army and the people. The influx of food from the northern Italian plain, which had been made possible by the Caporetto offensive, helped to alleviate the food shortages, but its real usefulness would not be completely apparent until the new harvests were brought in. The wheat of the Ukraine promised an even greater bonus when it was harvested, but until then the situation was grim, so much so in fact, that the Allies believed the summer of 1918 offensive to be a "Hunger Offensive," caused solely by the desperate food shortages within the empire.  

Several statistical facts can best illustrate the seriousness of the situation in the dual monarchy. First, the grain production of the monarchy was down to 52.7% of its prewar level. This meant that the individual's daily grain ration was reduced to 5.8 ounces per day by April 1918. Before the war the average Austrian had consumed nearly 18 ounces of grain per day. The situation in Hungary was somewhat better because the Hungarians withheld extra amounts of foodstuffs for internal consumption, but even here the ration was down to 7.7 ounces of grain per day. As the year progressed, the crisis grew until in the summer of 1918 the daily grain ration in

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Vienna dropped to about 2.8 ounces per day. The seriousness of this drop might not be apparent to the average American unless he realizes that this ration amounted to only a couple of slices of bread, and that this formed the bulk of the diet.

Although various grain products formed the staple of the normal Austrian diet, and therefore a reduction in its availability was the most serious shortage, the circumstances with regard to other ingredients of the diet were even worse. By April 1918 the fat and meat consumption within the monarchy ranged from a low of about half an ounce per person per day in Vienna to about an ounce per person per day in Hungary. Of course, the workers in occupations classified as "heavy labor" (such as coal miners) received a larger ration, but it can be readily understood that morale was dropping rapidly on the home front due to hunger and a lack of other basic necessities such as coal for heating. The poor morale led to strikes, renewed nationalist agitation, and general war weariness. These factors, in turn, embittered the front line soldier, who was angered by the strikes and depressed by the tribulations of his family. It was this situation that has led a modern Austrian historian to observe, "An analysis of the state of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and its army in the spring of 1918, and a comparison with that of its opponents clearly shows the enormous danger to the empire of an offensive of the dimensions of the Piave battle." 

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17 Ibid., pp. 40-41 and 60.
18 Ibid., p. 81.
19 Piala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, pp. 5-6.
Since these dangers were evident to the Armeeoberkommando, why was the decision made to go ahead with a great offensive during 1918? The answer lies partly in the military and political pressures that have already been discussed and the Armeeoberkommando's perception of the balance of power. First, while the leaders of the army fully realized the declining power of the monarchy and the armed forces, they still regarded the Austro-Hungarian army as a reliable tool, superior to its Italian opponent. Second, they were aware that matters within the Italian camp were also awry.

It is easy to forget that the Entente Powers were also showing signs of war strain and defeatism by 1918. In the previous year, the French army had mutinied and only chance had prevented the Germans from learning of the rebellion and taking advantage of the situation. Also in 1917 the Italian general staff bypassed its own government and made approaches to Austria about the possibility of concluding some kind of peace. Though this peace feeler was very tentative and was quickly withdrawn, it made very clear to the Armeeoberkommando that the Italian resolve was not so firm as it had been earlier in the war and was possibly weaker than Austria's. This impression was strengthened by the complete dissolution of the Italian 2nd army during the Caporetto offensive. It seemed quite possible that the Austro-Hungarian army could still fight and win another battle, and that peace was probable if a decisive victory was gained. The Armeeoberkommando could compare their own situation with the circumstances they believed to prevail in the enemy camp, and such a

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comparison was not totally unfavorable. There was even some room for restrained optimism; planning went ahead.

Although the sketching of an offensive plan and its details was still in a rather amorphous stage, matters were brought to a head on March 15, 1918, when Hindenburg telegraphed Arz to inform him that English and French troops were being withdrawn from the Italian theater to bolster the defense of France. As the German spring offensive was ready to begin, Hindenburg demanded that Austria-Hungary bring pressure to bear on the Italians so that Entente units on the Italian front would be retained there. 21

Arz informed the German commander-in-chief the very next day that, despite the monarchy's problems with food and coal supplies and transport, he would consult with Field Marshal Conrad and Field Marshal Borojevíć, his army group commanders on the Italian front, about the possibility of fixing a definite date for an Austrian offensive. 22 On March 27, 1918, Arz sent a further message to Spa:

I am honored to inform your excellency that I will carry out an attack against Italy with all the personnel and material means of the monarchy's army. The preparations for this operation will be ended by the end of May. As a result of this operation, which should lead us as far as the Adige River, I expect the military collapse of Italy. 23

Arz's enthusiasm in this telegram must have been purely for the

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21 Hindenburg to Arz, March 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1241, p. (597). The Secret Operations Nos. often have two sets of pagination. I have used parentheses to denote the stamped fascicle pagination in addition to a document's internal pagination.

22 Arz to Hindenburg, March 16, 1918, ibid.

23 Arz to Hindenburg, March 27, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, "Radetzky-Albrecht," Operations No. 142.007.
benefit of his compatriot in Spa, since in his own circles of Austria he was not nearly so optimistic. While there is no doubt that he expected to achieve success, he was not convinced that it would be so decisive as to knock Italy out of the war immediately. Sanguine or not, he had little choice other than to proceed with planning. 24

Now that the die was cast, the Austrians had to decide where their offensive was to take place and how many units had to be concentrated there to achieve their goals. At this point, problems began to surface within the army and the Armeeoberkommando since no one ever seems to have reached a definite decision regarding the final goal of the offensive. As a result, planning was diffuse, undirected, and sometimes divorced from reality.

Austria-Hungary really had very few options open to it in deciding where to launch the offensive. Aside from some relatively wild schemes such as the plan advanced by General Ludwig Pengov, who believed that the best option was to direct an attack westward across northern Italy towards the French Alps, 25 there were only three possible choices: an attack across the Piave River, an attack from the Seven Communities toward Vicenza and Padua, or an attack in the vicinity of Lake Garda, aimed at either Brescia or Verona. The debate over these possible alternatives was heated and deserves attention since its outcome eventually determined the fate of the monarchy.

First and most obvious of the three areas for an offensive was the Piave River. From the Adriatic coast, the Piave runs for about

24 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 262.

fifty miles in a west-north-west direction until it reaches the mountains of the Trentino; at this point it angles sharply northward. From the Adriatic to the vicinity of S. Dona di Piave, a distance of ten to twelve miles, the land on both sides of the river is criss-crossed by numerous small waterways. In this region it would be difficult to build up for an attack and impossible to exploit any initial success, so the area was completely ruled out during planning. The twenty-two miles between S. Dona di Piave and Nervesa, on the other hand, offered several suitable sites for an assault crossing of the river, particularly in the region of Papadoli Island, which was already held by the Austrians. The area from Nervesa to the mountains also offered several possible crossing points but they all were completely dominated by the Italian-held heights of the Montello and the foothills of the Grappa Massif. These heights made any assault in this area a very risky adventure.

It is obvious that the most auspicious choice for an assault crossing of the Piave would be the stretch of land between S. Dona di Piave and Nervesa. Besides the suitability of the terrain, the area offered several further advantages: first, a relatively complete supply network had been constructed in the Austrian rear areas, allowing a relatively easy buildup for the offensive; second, once the Italian lines were pierced, pursuit through the plain would be facilitated and the Italian road net would make it a simpler task for the Austrian supply and artillery trains to keep up with the advancing infantry; finally, the frontage of the attack would be restricted to less than twenty-five miles. This last factor assumes importance when viewed in conjunction with the Austrian army's compilation of
the experience learned in the war to date. The "Battle Doctrines, Part 12," stated that each infantry division should have an attack frontage of approximately two miles. The Austrian army in Italy had sufficient infantry divisions to carry out a fully supported assault on a single twenty-five mile front. This would require about thirteen divisions in the front line plus adequate reserves and flank guard units. Any extension of the frontage would violate the precepts laid down by the Armeeooberkommando.

There were disadvantages to any plan advocating an attack directly across the Piave, however, and the primary problem was that the Italians could easily arrive at the same conclusions as the Austrians. It is not surprising that the Italians built their main defensive positions along the Piave so that their greatest depth and strongest emplacements were concentrated in the region between S. Dona di Piave and Nervesa; to further complicate any Austrian offensive, the bulk of the Italian army was concentrated on the Piave line. Any attack would have to be made into the preponderance of the Italian strength, and even a successful assault might have little decisive effect because the Italians would be driven straight backwards along their lines of communication, allowing them the greatest chance of extricating their units with minimal loss. Success would be decisive only if the entire Italian army panicked and broke.

Another complication for the Austrians was that they would incur two great tactical disadvantages if they chose to attack across

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the Piave: the first problem was the river itself, but the second, less obvious difficulty was the lack of observation points. The southern banks of the Piave were thickly planted with vineyards and thick brush. Since the Austrians held no high ground north of the river they were unable to locate Italian artillery positions, rear defenses, and reserve areas by any means other than aerial observation. If they ever lost control of the air, the Austrian artillery would become, in effect, blind. ²⁸

A second possible area of assault would be on the mountain front in the region known as the Seven Communities. Although the boundaries of the Seven Communities are ill-defined, for purposes of this discussion the attack area will be defined as the territory between the Piave and Astico rivers. This front can be further subdivided into two sections separated by the Brenta River.

Between the Piave and Brenta rivers, the terrain is Italian mountain country of the worst type: precipitous, largely waterless, and with a near absence of roads. The front line in this area represented the high water mark of the Christmas battles, and the Austrian positions were still dominated by the commanding presence of the Grappa Massif, which the Italians had tenaciously defended. An offensive in this area offered the advantage that only a four mile advance would bring the Austrian armies down onto the Italian plain. Once the plain was reached the Austro-Hungarian armies could roll up the flank of the main Italian armies, trapping them against the Piave. The obstacles were, however, enormous. First, it would be difficult

²⁸Pengov, Wahrheit über die Piaveschlacht, p. 41.
to take the Grappa Massif itself. Second, supply would be nearly impossible since no railroads and few roads existed—the most common supply method was by aerial tramways. The lack of suitable road nets for supply would then be compounded once the Italian line was breached. There were no connecting roads between the Austrian and Italian lines other than along the Brenta and Piave River valleys. The absence of suitable roads would hinder exploitation of any success since neither artillery nor supplies could be rapidly brought forward to sustain the advance.

The second subdivision of the Seven Communities front was the area between the Brenta and Astico rivers. Here the most prominent terrain feature was the Asiago Plateau, of which the Entente forces held only the southernmost portion. Although the supply situation in the vicinity of Asiago would be greatly superior to that between the Brenta and the Piave, it was still greatly inferior to the supply net behind the Piave line. From the strategic point of view, this region offered the same advantages as the Brenta-Piave area: a short advance to the Italian plain, flanking the Piave line, with the added advantage of superior communications both before and after the breakthrough. The two major drawbacks were that a large portion of the advance would have to come through a wooded zone which would offer the defenders cover and would fragment and channel the attackers, plus the fact that the best troops in Italy, the English and French divisions, were garrisoning the defenses.

Another possible region of attack would be down both shores of Lake Garda. From a supply standpoint, this was an ideal region for an offensive since there were both excellent rail connections with
the rear areas extending back into Austria itself and good road nets extending past the Italian lines. This would allow both a continued ease of supply and the possibility of rapid exploitation. Two major hindrances countered these advantages. First, the advance would be constricted to a relatively narrow and easily blocked corridor on both sides of the lake; the corridor would allow a determined enemy time to delay and blunt the offensive until reserves were brought up. Second, the line of advance was relatively eccentric, drawing the advancing forces towards the southwest for a considerable distance before they could swing back to the east to threaten the main Italian forces. Still, this was an acceptable risk if the Austrians opted for a truly decisive battle that could permanently cripple the Italian army.

Two factors could and should have determined the best zone for an offensive: supply and intent. The most desirable location for an offensive aimed at achieving decisive results was not necessarily one in which a sufficient supply buildup could occur. Conversely, the areas in which supply accumulations could be most easily carried out were not necessarily propitious for a decisive battle. Finally, there was also the question of whether the monarchy was going to attempt to achieve a decisive success. The various disputes that emerged during the planning stages of the offensive can be understood in the light of these problems. The planning officers often talked past one another because they were considering different aspects of the offensive and not taking both factors into account. The lack of a clearly stated goal and a firm guiding hand merely compounded the problems.
As early as January 3, 1918, Conrad had begun advocating a great offensive to be carried out in the Seven Communities area during the late spring. The object of the attack would be to advance quickly across the Asiago Plateau, through the last mountain barrier, and debouch into the Italian plain, in the hope of cutting the Italian lines of communication and trapping all the Italian forces along the Piave. The attack would be carried out by the 11th army of Conrad's own army group. In a message to his 11th army commander in early February, Conrad spoke about an attack in the "strongest possible strength between the Astico and the Piave in order to bring the war against Italy to a decisive conclusion." 29 He indicated that the whole concept was still in the planning stages but insisted that Austria-Hungary could not allow the situation to deteriorate into "positional warfare" as had occurred along the Isonzo. He believed that any reversion to the static warfare of earlier years would cost Austria the loss of initiative and would result in a stalemate with no hope of future victory.

Shortly after this communication, he outlined his plans in greater detail in a message to the Armeeoberkommando. The main thrust, Conrad stated, was to come in the mountainous area between the Astico and the Piave rivers. It would require at least twenty-five divisions. If the strength were available for an expanded attack, a further elaboration of the plan called for a smaller attack across the Piave River, aimed at Treviso; this assault would be primarily diversionary but would serve to pin the Italians into

29 Army Group Conrad to 11th Army Command, February 7, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Conrad Archiv, Fasc. A. 7, Operations No. 4000/36.
their river defenses and make it difficult for them either to maneuver to blunt Conrad’s thrust or to escape encirclement. Conrad was quite insistent, however, that if the total strength of the Austro-Hungarian army were insufficient to mount both attacks, the Piave attack should be the one canceled. The Austrian divisions that could be spared from holding the defenses along the Piave then should be moved to join the right wing of his own army group in the Piave valley.  

Conrad’s grandiose plan reflected his continuing belief that the monarchy had to achieve a decisive victory and achieve it quickly. The plan was reminiscent of his 1916 plan, which attained some success, and of his plan for Caporetto, which was ignored until too late. As has been discussed earlier, both of Conrad’s previous attempts to gain a victory in the Trentino had miscarried, but in neither case was the failure directly attributable to any miscalculation or fault in the plan itself. Conrad now presented a new plan that was to be revised from his Caporetto scheme only in the factor that the main lines of defense lay along the Piave rather than the Isonzo. The proposal can be visualized as very similar to the Schlieffen Plan, adapted to Italian circumstances.

Conrad was not the only member of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces who was trying to find a solution to Austria’s strategic dilemma. On March 8, 1918, Lt. Colonel Sigismund von Schilhawsky, an officer on the Armeeoberkommando planning division staff, submitted a memorandum detailing his own evaluation of the situation.

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30 Conrad to Armeeoberkommando, February 16, 1918, *ibid.*, Operations No. 4000/66.
This memorandum rejected the basis of Conrad's plan—an attack between the Astico and Asiago—as too difficult, since the Italians had had two years to fortify the area. Schilhawsky agreed with some of Conrad's objections to making the Piave crossing the main attack area, but his own solution was different. Schilhawsky advocated an offensive down the east bank of the Brenta (between the Brenta and the Piave), with an accompanying attack across the Piave in the vicinity of Papadopoli Island. There was, however, a cautionary note appended to the plan. Schilhawsky appeared somewhat worried about the most formidable barrier to any offensive in the Brenta area: the presence of the Grappa Massif.  

General Arz, the chief of staff, had his own ideas on the subject. He seems to have preferred the idea of attacking directly across the Piave in the vicinity of Papadopoli Island with all of the force that could be mustered. He rejected the idea of crossing the lower reaches of the river due to the problems posed by the canals and waterways, and also opposed any crossing within striking distance of the Montello because the mountain would dominate all crossing sites. This left about a seven to nine mile wide front, suitable for a large assault force. This solution would aim at a less decisive battle than those envisioned by Conrad and Schilhawsky, and only aimed at driving the Italians back to the Adige River. Such a solution could not hope to achieve an unequivocal victory.

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32 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 263-64.
unless the Italian army collapsed; it was either an indication that he was not so sanguine about what could be achieved in Italy as he had implied to Hindenburg, or that he believed that Italy was near collapse. It is entirely possible for Arz to have believed both of these contradictory things.

A fourth suggestion for the offensive came from General Krauß, the successful commander of the Austrian forces during the Caporetto offensive. Krauß was always the type of commander who worried about operative details before considering tactical questions and had often criticized Conrad for failing to take such details into consideration. Due to operative difficulties entailed by an attack in the Seven Communities, Krauß consistently opposed any attack plan calling for operations on the Asiago Plateau. He did not argue that a sufficient force could not be built up there or that an attack would not succeed there; rather he concentrated his attention on the argument that a successful pursuit was impossible. The combination of difficulties inherent in a buildup in the region combined with the even greater problems of exploitation offended his operative senses, and led him to seek a solution elsewhere. He was as aware of the indecisive nature of an attack across the Piave as Conrad, and so he turned his attention further to the west.

Krauß's own preference was for an attack down both shores of Lake Garda; only here would the attacking troops have ready supply from the beginning of the buildup throughout any advance.\(^{33}\) The plan would offer the advantage of a very conclusive victory (if

\(^{33}\)Krauß, Die Ursachen unsere Niederlage, pp. 246-49.
success were achieved at all), due to the deep encirclement of the Italian army. Its disadvantage was that the Austrian forces would have to cover a great deal of ground very quickly during their advance although the terrain was suited to a delaying defense.

It is obvious that each of these plans had advantages and disadvantages, but each can be assigned suitability depending on the ultimate goal of the offensive. Any attack between the Piave and the Brenta rivers could not be considered as a sole venture. The inability to move men, guns, and supplies past the front lines and over the Grappa Massif meant that such an offensive would either have to be merely a preliminary step to a greater offensive at some later date (indeed, Conrad had proposed something similar as a preliminary operation), or it would have to be accompanied by a major attack across the Piave. In this circumstance, the Piave crossing would be the major blow, while the advance in the mountains would act primarily as a threat. The plan for an attack in the region of Lake Garda, while more feasible on an operational level, would have necessitated a much longer advance through unfavorable terrain than the other alternatives and was thus more prone to meeting an insuperable obstacle (though Krauß had proved at Caporetto that such an advance was possible). This left the possibilities of an attack on the Asiago Plateau or an attack across the Piave River—or a combination of the two. The Asiago attack or the combined attack would obviously pose the greatest threat to the Italians since its success would offer the threat of their complete defeat.

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34 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 263-64.
The Piave offensive would have to take place into the heart of the Italian strength but would be by far the easiest of the possible attacks to mount and exploit. The choice would have to be made in consideration of the amount of force the army could bring to bear, and it was vital that the monarchy not overreach its resources.

Of all of these possibilities, it appears that the Entente Powers most feared the possibility of an attack across the Asiago Plateau. There is no evidence that the Italians seriously considered Krauß' plan, and it is obvious that they placed great faith in the defenses of the Grappa Massif. The bulk of the Italian army defended the Piave line and was in no danger of annihilation from a frontal attack, but General Diaz, the commander of the Italian army, expressed great fear over the possibilities inherent in an offensive in the Asiago area and he posted his best troops there.35

A British artillery officer noted that any Austrian advance in the Seven Communities would bring them quickly to the edge of the plateau and that the lines that the British held were "the last we could hope to hold without very grave embarrassment."36 These observations show that the Entente commanders were more highly concerned about the security of the mountain front than has generally been recognized.

When General Arz sent his message to General Hindenburg on March 27, 1918, it appeared that a plan of campaign had been decided upon, and all that was necessary was for the Austrians to complete

36 Dalton, With the British Guns in Italy, p. 185.
their preparations and carry out the grand scheme. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, a definite decision had not been reached as to the army's operations, and the battles that ensued were those between Austrian and Austrian rather than against the Italians. In the struggle to arrive at a plan of campaign in Italy, all of the difficulties inherent in the Emperor Charles' personality and the character of his appointments began to come to light. As the debate over strategy progressed, it became more and more apparent that neither Charles nor his chief of staff had the firmness of character or purpose to control events. Planning went ahead, and willful subordinates were able to impose their own beliefs on these two men; more important, Charles and Arz did not have the ability to say "no" and in the long run began saying "yes" to ideas that they knew were wrong.
CHAPTER IV

FOR WANT OF A NAIL... 

TWELVE INFANTRY DIVISIONS, AND ABOUT 300 HEAVY GUNS

All the brouhaha over the summer offensive planning began simply enough. From a purely theoretical point of view, Arz had no objections to Conrad's plans. The chief of staff based his opposition to the plan on the practical belief that the operation was too grandiose and far beyond the limited means of the monarchy to carry out.\(^1\) This pessimistic evaluation of the monarchy's capabilities stemmed from a recent study of the strength of the Austro-Hungarian army compiled by General of the Infantry Vladimir Freiherr Giesl von Gieslingen. The gist of the report was that although the Austrian army, with over 4,200,000 men in its ranks, still presented an impressive façade, it had been badly battered by three and a half years of war. During the course of the war over 2,740,000 men had either become casualties or been taken prisoner. The older classes, convalescents, and returned prisoners of war were now under arms; this resulted in a general decline in troop quality.\(^2\) The great majority of the men in the army were not directly involved in combat duties; according to the best estimate only about 600,000 men

\(^1\)Arz, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, p. 262.

\(^2\)Eleventh Army Command Diary, March 10, 1918, Vol. VIII, pp. 2,891-92, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna); Fasc. 296.
were in the various infantry formations upon which the final success of any battle would rely.

TABLE I
AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN COMMAND STRUCTURE
ITALY, 1918

Commander in Chief—Emperor Charles
Chief of the General Staff—General Arz
Chief of the Operations Staff—Brigadier General Waldstätten

Army Group Conrad—Field Marshal Conrad von Hützendorf
Army Group Chief of Staff—Major General Rudolf Müller

10th Army—Field Marshal Alexander Freiherr von Krobatin
Chief of Staff—Brigadier General Domaschnian

XXI Corps—General of the Infantry Kasimir Freiherr von Lütgendorf (2 divisions)
XIV Corps—General of the Infantry Ignaz Verdross (1.5 divisions)
XX Corps—General of the Infantry Julius Kaiser (2 divisions)
Gruppe Erzherzog Peter Ferdinand (3.5 divisions)

11th Army—General Viktor Scheuchenstiel
Chief of Staff—Brigadier General Ludwig Sündermann

III Corps—General Hugo Martiny (3.5 divisions)
XIII Corps—General of the Infantry Friedrich Csáday (5 divisions)
VI Corps—General of the Infantry Ernst Kletter (4 divisions)
XXVI Corps—General of the Infantry Ernst Horsetzky (3 divisions)
I Corps—General of the Infantry Ferdinand Kosak (2 divisions)
XV Corps—General of the Infantry Karl Scotti (2.5 divisions)

Army Group Boroević—Field Marshal Boroević
Army Group Chief of Staff—Brigadier General Anton Pitreich

6th Army—General, the Archduke Joseph
Chief of Staff—Major General Rudolf Freiherr von Willerding

II Corps—General of the Infantry Rudolf Krauß (1.5 divisions)
XXIV Corps—Major General Ludwig Goiginger (3 divisions)

Isonzo Army—General Wenzel Freiherr von Wurm
Chief of Staff—Colonel Theodor Körner von Siegringen
XVI Corps--General of the Infantry Rudolf Králiček
(3.5 divisions)
IV Corps-- General of the Cavalry Alois Prince
Schonburq-Hartenstein (3 divisions)
VII Corps--General of the Infantry Georg Freiherr
Schariczer von Reny (3.5 divisions)
XXIII Corps--General of the Infantry Maximilian
Csicseries von Bacsany (2.5 divisions)3

Despite his misgivings about Conrad’s plan, Arz had already
informed Spa that a quick decision about the place and timing of the
Austrian offensive would be made, and on March 23, 1918, he instruct-
ed that preliminary orders for the summer offensive be issued. These
orders appeared to follow the outline suggested by Conrad. The of-
fensive was to be carried out in the area from the Astico to the
Piave, with the major effort directed "along both banks of the Bren-
ta." The goal of the offensive was to advance into the vicinity of
the town of Bacchiglione. The code name for the offensive by Con-
rad's army group was to be "Radetzky." A second and smaller offen-
sive, code named "Avalanche," was to be launched in the Tonale Pass.4

On March 27 Arz sent a message to Spa informing German head-
quarters that the Austrian army would definitely carry out an attack
in Italy. The entire plan seemed complete when Boroević was inform-
ed on March 28 that his army group would also be involved in the
campaign: "the main attack which will be carried out between Astico
and Piave will be accompanied by a thrust of the Isonzo army in the
direction of Treviso." This final operation was given the code name
"Albrecht."5

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5Ibid.
Assuming that this plan of campaign was an endorsement of his own views, Conrad dispatched his assessment of the situation to the Armeeoberkommando on April 1, 1918. The key point in this communication was his statement that a minimum of thirty-two and a half divisions was needed for a successful breakthrough on his front. He continued: "The more the Armeeoberkommando can go in this direction, the more lasting a success can be expected."\(^6\) In Conrad's plan, the main attack was to occur between the Astico and the Piave, with the primary thrust being launched on a four mile front from Mt. Sisemol to Canove. Fifteen infantry and one cavalry divisions were to take part in this phase of the operations. Seven to ten infantry divisions would execute an offensive on the east bank of the Brenta, with at least two divisions taking part in the Tonale Pass operation and two more divisions making a diversionary assault along the Adige River.\(^7\) The remaining divisions he requested would presumably constitute the army group reserves. Conrad added that the 11th army would be responsible for such a long sector of the front that a new army command should be formed for the area east of the Brenta to relieve the 11th army of part of the burden of controlling so many units.

The Armeeoberkommando found it impossible to fulfill Conrad's request for thirty-two and a half divisions; at least that is what

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\(^6\) Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, April 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Conrad Operation No. 15.000 in Armeeoberkommando Operation No. 142.018. An Armeeoberkommando officer, probably Waldstatten, has penciled in an emphatic "No!" by this statement.

\(^7\) Ibid.
they told Conrad. On April 1 Conrad had only fifteen divisions of infantry and one of cavalry under his command, and he was scheduled to receive only five more infantry divisions and one more cavalry division. This would leave him eleven infantry and one cavalry divisions short of his minimum requirements. When Waldstätten received Conrad's request for more troops he made a notation in the margin to the effect that Conrad's army group should be "no stronger than is absolutely necessary and...as weak as possible."  

Because there was such a wide divergence between Conrad's requested needs and the Armeoberkommando's preconception of what he could manage with, Conrad was summoned to Baden on April 11, 1918, to meet with the emperor, Arz, and Waldstätten. Conrad may have had some inkling that he was not going to receive a particularly cordial reception in Baden, for he seemed to fall into an uncharacteristic depression. When he talked to Conrad on April 6, General Bardolff found him very bitter about everything "that came from 'upstairs.'" He was pessimistic about the planned operation and indicated that he had given up all hope of achieving any notable success.  

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8 *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg*, Vol. VII, p. 191. It should be noted that Austro-Hungarian cavalry divisions of 1918 actually fought as infantry. They retained their cavalry designations but since they were much less powerful than an infantry division they were counted as one half of a division in strength calculations. The official history quotes the above reenforcements for Conrad, but conflicts with the figure given in Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeoberkommando Operations Division, Operation No. 142.014, April 1, 1918, which indicates that he was to receive eight infantry divisions, one cavalry division, plus miscellaneous artillery.  


Nonetheless, in spite of his pessimism, it became apparent that Conrad was not going to budge from his demands and his interpretation of the original attack orders. On April 9, 1918, he sent a further message to the Armeeoberkommando emphasizing his adherence to his original views. "It is already decided," he wrote, "that the attack will be carried out down both banks of the Brenta, and the main force will be deployed to the west of the Brenta." He went on, "In accordance with Operations No. 142.014, one cavalry division and eighteen infantry divisions (nineteen including the Edelweiß division) are available for the main attack (including the XV corps)."

In his evaluation of the situation, Conrad went on to point out that since his operation had been designated as the "main thrust" he should be allocated all possible resources. In conclusion he stated that since the accompanying attack of the Isonzo army towards Treviso, plus the defense of the rest of the Piave line, could be accomplished by a smaller number of units than Boroević had assigned to him, one and a half infantry divisions and seven cavalry divisions could be detached from the Isonzo army and given to Conrad with no diminution of Boroević's effort.  

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that Conrad ever received an official reply to this opus, but there is evidence that the letter and his arguments were not accorded a warm reception by the Armeeoberkommando. A marginal notation of "no!" is appended to his statement that the main force of the attack will be on the west bank.

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11 Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando, April 9, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Conrad Operation No. 15.000/12 in Armeeoberkommando Operation No. 142.026, April 11, 1918.
of the Brenta and was repeated in conjunction with his statement about the number of divisions available to him. It is evident that disagreement between the field marshal and the Armeeoberkommando existed. The matter should have been cleared up in the discussions that were held in Baden on April 11 when the whole matter was again debated.

One of the strangest aspects of the conference between Charles, Conrad, Arz, and Waldstätten in Baden is that there is no existing official transcript of the discussion. It is unclear whether no transcript was made (surely an unusual omission) or whether such a transcript, if actually made, was destroyed at some later date. A significant indication that no transcript was made is that Conrad seems to have had some doubts as to the official nature of the interview and some further worry that the conclusions reached in the discussion might become lost. There can be no other explanation for the fact that immediately upon his return to headquarters on April 12 he composed a long report to the Armeeoberkommando outlining his version of what had transpired at the conference. By acting in this manner, he was able to put his own interpretation of the discussion into the official records of both his own army group and the Armeeoberkommando; unless the Armeeoberkommando officially rejected his message, it would automatically have a semi-official standing, the meaning of which would not be so conveniently lost at a future date as could a memory of some verbal agreement.

Some of the major points that Conrad noted in this communication were: (1) that Conrad and Charles were in complete agreement that an offensive in Italy was both desirable and necessary; (2)
that Conrad had argued that Austria must attempt to achieve a decisive victory and that such a victory could only be attained by launching a major attack on the west bank of the Brenta, in conjunction with an attack by the Isonzo army across the Piave towards Treviso; (3) that a successful offensive on the west bank of the Brenta would automatically result in the collapse of the enemy's positions between the Brenta and the Piave (i.e., the Grappa Massif); and (4) that, in consideration of the reduced combat forces available to the empire, the decision as to the location of the decisive blow must be made immediately and all reserve units placed in accordance with this decision, because reserve units stationed in a position to be able to come to the aid of either Conrad or Boroević could not reach either one in time to achieve a decisive success. In Conrad's words:

The main attack should achieve a great and decisive result, hence it must bring to bear the maximum available infantry and artillery strength that is possible. In the area between the ASTICO and BRENTA it is possible to accomplish this in the available time; it is absolutely impossible to do this between the BRENTA and PIAVE because there is no possibility of deploying sixteen to eighteen divisions and supplying munitions, and likewise excluded is the placement of masses of artillery and timely munitioning so easily as seems to be possible between the ASTICO and BRENTA.\footnote{Army Group Command Conrad to Armeoberkommando Chief of Operations, April 12, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Conrad Operations No. 15.009/25-b in Armeoberkommando Operation No. 142.033, April 17, 1918.}

Conrad stated the tactical reasons for preferring the Asiago area for the attack and rejected an attack between the Brenta and the Piave on tactical grounds. His closing statement shows that Conrad had no doubt that the emperor had agreed fully to his plan: "I
request the covering orders be issued and the preparations begin on
the basis of the above explanation and the approval by His Majesty. ¹³

No one repudiated Conrad's interpretation of the understand-
ing that had been reached at the meeting, officially. There was no
doubt that at the Baden conference the emperor had accepted Conrad's
point of view and endorsed his attack plans. Although all of Con-
rad's demands for troops were not approved, several divisions orig-
inally scheduled for employment by Boroević were reassigned to his
command, and it was decided that the Isonzo army would be responsible
for releasing the divisions that would form the Armeoberkommando
reserve. ¹⁴ Conrad felt that he had won the emperor over to his
side and that the entire matter was settled. As a matter of fact,
the real problems were just beginning.

Unfortunately for Conrad, Arz and Waldstätten were still in-
fatuated with their own plans for the campaign: a strong attack be-
tween the Brenta and the Piave, accompanied by a powerful offensive
across the Piave by Boroević. They were not about to depart from
their own strategy merely because the commander-in-chief had endorsed
another proposal. Arz and Waldstätten did not issue the orders to
begin the preparations necessitated by Conrad's strategic plan. In-
stead they tried to rectify the initial blunder they had made in
allowing Conrad to meet the emperor face to face, even though it was
in their presence. Conrad was a man of imperious will, a factor

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, pp. 191-92. The accretion of strength to Conrad's army group by this act was
not really that great since most of the divisions released were
cavalry units.
that had led to his dismissal from the chief of staff post when Charles became emperor, and in a face to face duel of wills there was no way that Charles would refuse to acquiesce to Conrad's beliefs; therefore, Charles agreed to Conrad's plan for an attack west of the Brenta. 15 Charles was an intelligent man, but he tended to agree with the last person with whom he spoke. Fully aware of this, Arz usually tried to keep people who might influence the emperor to change decisions already reached from having appointments with him. 16

It might not have seemed too dangerous to let this particular interview take place because both Arz and Waldstätten were present to stiffen the emperor's resistance. This overlooks the fact that neither of these men were rocks of resistance themselves. There is some question as to how vigorously Arz opposed Conrad at this meeting. Arz himself always maintained that he had energetically protested against Conrad's plan. His contention is supported by the Archduke Joseph, although it is uncertain where the Archduke obtained this information. 17 General Cramon, the German liaison officer, expressed the belief that Arz was very half-hearted in his objections. 18 This opinion was shared by General Bardolff, who stated that Arz was so indecisive that he never really told Charles what his objections

15 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 165.
16 Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 48.
18 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 165.
were. According to Bardolff, Emperor Charles, unaware of how strongly Arz opposed Conrad's ideas, went ahead and endorsed them.\(^{19}\) This interpretation was confirmed to a certain extent by the fact that after the June battles were over and Field Marshal Boroević chided Charles for having made a foolish decision the emperor's only response was: "But Conrad wished it!"\(^{20}\) The most likely explanation of what happened at the conference is simply that Charles and Arz were their normal indecisive selves and that Waldstätten, still a relatively junior officer, was too unsure of himself to intervene. Conrad probably delivered an authoritative lecture which they could not refute on the spot, and they all expressed agreement with him, as much to get rid of him as anything else. When Conrad's memorandum appeared a few days later, there was nothing that Arz and Waldstätten could do because the emperor had agreed to back Conrad.

Emperor Charles was convinced of Conrad's theory, but once free of Conrad's presence, Arz and Waldstätten set about bringing the concept of the operation back into line with their own wishes. They began to play a double game, outwardly adhering to Conrad's campaign plan and the emperor's instructions while covertly ensuring that their own projects would receive priority in supplies and men. In this manner they hoped that their own plans would come to fruition while Conrad's army group, starved of matériel, would have to give up its attack on the Asiago Plateau.

This is not to say the Conrad's plan was the right one and

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\(^{19}\) Bardolff, *Soldat im alten Österreich*, p. 135.

\(^{20}\) Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. II, p. 82.
Arz's and Waldstätten's strategic schemes were wrong, but merely that the two leaders of the Armeeoberkommando chose the wrong course of action to attempt to rectify matters. In actual fact, they had only two reasonable courses of action. First of all, they could have suppressed their misgivings, obeyed the emperor's instructions, and provided Conrad with the men and matériel that he had requested. Had they done so, Conrad would obviously be blamed if the operation failed. Secondly, if they were so opposed to his plan that they could not possibly agree to it under any circumstances, they should have emphatically informed the emperor about their objections to it and tendered their resignations as a token of their opposition if Charles balked. If their resignations had been accepted, the officers who replaced them would at least have carried out the preparations for the operation without major misgivings. If, as was more likely, their resignations were not accepted, they would have won their point. Unfortunately, they compromised and attempted to accomplish by subterfuge what they could not achieve otherwise. By creating a situation in which both plans were being implemented at the same time, they not only contributed immeasurably to the problems involved in preparing for the campaign, but they also dissipated the strength of the Austro-Hungarian army by committing it to a task far beyond its ability to accomplish. While they furthered their own plans they could procrastinate and avoid issuing any definite instructions to Conrad or giving him the troops which he had requested on the ground that they had still not received a definite plan of campaign from Boroević.
General Alfred Krauß, who was the heir apparent to the chief of staff post, was also questioned by the Armeeoberkommando and asked to comment on the strategic plan. Krauß' statement, when it arrived, held little solace for the Armeeoberkommando. Although Krauß reaffirmed his preference for an attack down the banks of Lake Garda, there was no doubt that he was as strongly opposed to an offensive between the Brenta and the Piave as Conrad. Krauß stated that any area chosen for an offensive must be evaluated in respect to three factors: the goal of the operation, the capability of employing powerful forces, and the capacity to supply these forces throughout the offensive. While maintaining the superiority of his own chosen battle ground, he argued that in each respect the Seven Communities region was far superior to the area between the Brenta and the Piave.  

Since Boroević had not yet filed a plan of operations for his army group, Waldstätten visited his headquarters on April 15, 1918, to confer with Boroević and his staff and to orient himself regarding

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21 I Corps Command to Deputy Chief of the General Staff, April 14, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Operations No. 142,031. It is interesting to note that if Conrad, Krauß, and Boroević disagreed on every other matter, they all opposed an attack on the Grappa Massif. Krauß had attempted the task once during the last phase of the Caporetto offensive and was convinced it was impossible. Army Group Boroević made the agreement unanimous on April 26, 1918, when they informed the Armeeoberkommando that "(1) it was necessary to take Mt. Tomba but this could not be done so long as Mt. Pallone is in enemy hands; (2) Mt. Pallone can only be taken over Mt. Spinuccia; and (3) Mt. Spinuccia can only be attacked by an advance along an exposed ridge, wide enough for only one company." Army Group Command Boroević to Armeeoberkommando, April 26, 1918, Operations No. 1105/25 as quoted in Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 13, Colonel Egon Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht u. Schlacht von Vittorio-Veneto 1918," Pt. IV, p. 5.
their intentions. The field marshal took this opportunity to complain bitterly that the empire did not have the men or resources to attempt a double-pronged attack. Like Conrad, he insisted that the main effort had to be concentrated in one thrust, but he asserted that the one effort should be his crossing of the Piave. He and Waldstäten found large areas of agreement in that neither was happy with Conrad's plan. Waldstäten departed after assuring Boroević that he would receive more reinforcements and after informing him that the proposed date for the offensive would be approximately mid-June. 22

This incident, although minor, might be considered the first step in Arz' and Waldstäten's campaign to circumvent Conrad. On the 13th, the 11th army had notified Waldstäten that its artillery preparations for Radetzky would not be completed until July 10. 23 Although there might be other explanations, Waldstäten's blithe assurance that the offensive would begin about three weeks before Conrad's main army was ready to attack reminds one of his earlier statement that Conrad's attack should be "no stronger than is necessary and... as weak as possible." The implication is that Waldstäten was not greatly concerned whether or not Conrad's army was at full strength. Also, despite the supposed agreement at the Baden conference that Boroević already had more strength than was necessary to carry out his part in the plan, Waldządten had now

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22 Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. II, p. 82.

23 Eleventh Army Command to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, April 13, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.031.
promised him a larger share of the reinforcements than was originally planned.

At this point, the rather enigmatic Field Marshal Boroević assumed a role of great importance. He was known before the war as an exacting officer, if not a martinet, and as a proponent of offensive warfare. Despite his reputation as an aggressive attacker, he was chosen in 1915 to command the Austro-Hungarian forces on the Isonzo front, and for two and a half years he conducted a series of brilliant defensive battles there. Perhaps this period affected him as the Western Front affected many generals because he appears to have developed a trench mentality. It came as a surprise when the two armies under his command performed so poorly during the Caporetto offensive. His pursuit of the Duke of Aosta's army was half-hearted at best, and Boroević seemed unable to instill an aggressive spirit in his men. Now, in 1918, Boroević was the army's leading proponent of a waiting, defensive strategy. He was certain that the monarchy was not strong enough to undertake a major offensive, and he stated this position to both the Armeeoberkommando and the emperor. He simply believed that Austria-Hungary could no longer defeat Italy.

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24 There are no good, full-scale biographies of Boroević, but there are several adequate articles: Klaus Fuss, "Feldmarschall Boroević—Soldat seines Kaisers," Nation Europa, Vol. XIX, No. 6 (June, 1969), pp. 36-41; Edmund Glaise-Horstenau, "Svetozor Boroević von Bojna," reprint from Neue Österreichische Biographie, 1815-1918, pp. 109-115, in Kriegsarchiv (Vienna); and Rudolf Kizling, "Feldmarschall Svetozar Boroević von Bojna," Süddeutsch Vierteljahresblätter, No. 1 (1962), pp. 9-15. Boroević was the son of a Croat Grenzer and had grown up in the army. He was one of the few individuals to advance from the ranks to the position of field marshal in the Austro-Hungarian army.

Boroević played a very equivocal role in the preparations for the coming offensive. He continued to insist until the day of the battle that the army was incapable of conducting such a campaign, but at the same time he maintained that if a campaign were to be undertaken, it should be carried out by his army group under his command. General Cramon has suggested that this determination to lead the main attack was caused by the fact that "Boroević was not the kind of man to be satisfied with secondary enterprises," but there was probably more to the matter than this. Boroević was a proud man and possibly somewhat anxious to make up for his weak performance during Caporetto. Therefore, although he believed that no campaign should be undertaken, he also thought that if such an offensive was necessary he was the best man to lead the army, and the Piave was the best place to attempt to defeat the enemy. It was this estimate that motivated him when he informed the Armeeoberkommando on April 25, 1918:

The attack over the Piave will devolve in the first place upon the Isonzo army.

This attack must be carried out energetically and with a lavish use of force, especially since its success would have much greater consequences than any thrust by the army group of Field Marshal Baron von Conrad.27

Boroević and his staff completed their own plan of campaign in accordance with their beliefs about the importance of their operation. On the 25th of April they forwarded it to Arz. In view of

26 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 165.

27 Army Group Command Boroević to Armeeoberkommando, April 25, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Armee Group Command Boroević Operation No. 1100/25 in Armeeoberkommando Operation No. 142,060, April 30, 1918.
the statement by Boroević on the 25th, it is not surprising that his plan of operations had greatly increased the scope of responsibilities of the Isonzo army. The primary focus of the army's effort was to be an assault crossing of the Piave in the vicinity of Papadopoli Island. A disturbing factor, however, was that the army group had proposed another extension of the battlefield, calling for diversionary crossings of the river at S. Dona di Piave and at Nervesa, plus a joint operation on the coast with the help of the navy.²⁸ Fortunately, the fleet refused to consider this plan, and at least the amphibious landing was dropped from consideration. To counter this good news, the Armeekommando agreed to both of the secondary operations.

The last army to be heard from was the 10th, which had the responsibility for the planning and execution of the attack on the Tonale Pass. In comparison with the plans for the other offensive thrusts, "Avalanche" posed few difficulties for the planners. The terrain ranged from the difficult to the impossible but was typical of the small scale operations that both sides had been carrying out in the Tirol since the beginning of the war. Since there was only one route for an advance, planning was simplified: shortly before dawn there would be a short gas barrage, followed by a two hour artillery bombardment beginning at dawn; next, the two divisions that were to participate in the attack would leave their trenches, and the division moving along the valley floor would quickly break

²⁸ Isonzo Army Command to Army Group Boroević, April 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeekommando Operations Division, Isonzo Army Command Operations No. 2236, in Armeekommando "Files without Numbers."
through the enemy line and take Edolos in one bound; this would
isolate the Italian mountain positions, causing them to fall auto-
matically to the Austro-Hungarian division advancing along the
ridges. In the long run, the success of this operation would ren-
der the Italian line untenable as far as the Swiss border due to
the severance of its lines of communication.29 The theory was sim-
ple, but carrying out the plan in that particular terrain was any-
thing but simple.

In addition to the Tonale Pass operation, the 10th army had
one more task that was aimed less at achieving spectacular success
than at easing the task of the neighboring 11th army. The 10th
army was instructed to set into motion a series of deceptions de-
signed to give the impression that the main Austro-Hungarian attack
would come in the 10th army sector along the banks of the Astico
River. These ruses ranged from merely increasing patrol activity
to a frequent changing of battery positions and taking advantage of
good flying weather to march and counter march troops along approach
roads, only to march them back at night. All of this would hopeful-
ly appear to the Italians as an increasing buildup of forces on the
10th army front.30

By the time both army groups had completed all of their plans

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29 Army Group Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division,
April 26, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando
Operations Division, Army Group Conrad Operations No. 15.000/52 in
Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.069, May 2, 1918.

30 Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations
Division, April 27, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armee-
oberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Conrad Opera-
tions No. 15.000/56 in Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.061,
April 30, 1918.
the field marshals were in complete disagreement. Conrad fulminated that it was "irrational" to strengthen Boroević's army group because it was only a secondary attack force and the most it would do in case of success was to push the Italians back along their lines of communication. Boroević was just as adamant in maintaining that an attack in the Seven Communities sector was doomed to failure because of the terrain problems and the strong enemy forces assembled there. In addition, the Armeeoberkommando was at odds with Conrad over which bank of the Brenta was to carry the main weight of the attack, and Arz and Waldstätten were playing their own game to circumvent their orders from the emperor in respect to Conrad's offensive.

At this point, it should have been apparent to Arz and Waldstätten that their scheme was getting out of control. Arz had originally condemned Conrad's plan as too grandiose, but by now he had added the Tonale Pass attack to it and greatly increased the scope of the Isonzo army's responsibilities. Earlier strength calculations had shown that the Austro-Hungarian army was capable of launching a major attack on a frontage of about twenty-five miles, but it was now committed to an offensive along a front of nearly a hundred and twenty-five miles. Although direct offensive action would not occur over every mile of the front, it is clear that the extension of the attack sectors had become so great that the army was not strong enough to meet all of the demands.

A brief study of the escalating strength requirements of the various armies indicates the impossibility of solving this problem. In the mountain sector, Conrad had originally planned on employing the 11th army, consisting of the I, VI, III, and XXVI corps, with
a total strength of sixteen divisions, plus two extra field artillery brigades and an extra mountain artillery regiment. After the Armeeoberkommando expanded his task by ordering the attack on the Tonale Pass and instructed him to carry out an offensive on both banks of the Brenta, he was forced to increase his estimate of the number of divisions required to a total of thirty-one infantry and three cavalry divisions. At the time he made this estimate in early April he still lacked one cavalry and eleven infantry divisions.

In the case of Boroevic's army group, the planners had made some preliminary estimates in mid-April. Calculating their requirements as based on a five to six mile breakthrough frontage, they informed the Armeeoberkommando that they would need a total of fourteen infantry divisions plus two extra field artillery brigades. In late April, when the final plan was submitted, with its expanded role for the Isonzo army, the new strength calculations revealed the need for twenty-three to twenty-four divisions, and this number would suffice only for immediate needs. It left the army without any reserve divisions—a situation which the army staff deplored as "very unfortunate." The number of artillery brigades that the army desired also accelerated at an equal pace. The late April report

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31Eleventh Army Command to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, March 9, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, 11th Army Operations No. 1288/2 in Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.003, March 23, 1918.

32Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, pp. 189-90.

33Isonzo Army Command to Army Group Command Boroevic, April 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Isonzo Army Command Operations No. 2236, in Armeeoberkommando "Files without Numbers."
showed that the army was woefully short of artillery pieces and lacked approximately 20,000 artillery horses. 34

What had begun as a simple attack in the mountains by Conrad's army, or a straightforward thrust across the Piave by Boroević's army, had now become a Chinese fire drill. The plan was now incredibly complex, extending far beyond the resources of the empire. A firm hand was needed at the controls but no such guidance was available. Having set this behemoth in motion, Arz and Waldstätten found themselves unable to control their own creation. They could not funnel the required number of divisions to both army groups, and since they were relying on subterfuge rather than direct action, they could not respond to Conrad's requirements and complaints other than by temporizing. Arz and Waldstätten continued to promise substantial reinforcements to Boroević, but whether they could deliver on their promises was still uncertain.

Despite the disputes within the Armeebekommando or between the various military leaders of Austria-Hungary, the preparations for the offensive had to begin. The army groups began to gird themselves for the battle under a continuing cloud of uncertainty as to the final location and weight of the attack. This already difficult task was made impossible by the continuing friction between the two army groups, each sure of its own mission and each suspicious of any men and supplies given to the other group. While Conrad and

34 Army Group Command Boroević to Armeeeoberkommando Operations Division, April 30, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Boroevic Operations No. 1100/25 in Armeeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.060, April 30, 1918.
Boročić eyed each other suspiciously and bombarded the Armeeoberkommando with demands and requests, Arz, Waldstätten, and their cohorts in the Armeeoberkommando continued to play their own game, to the detriment of the entire effort.

The greatest single task involved in the preparations for the battle was the transfer of units and supplies from the Russian front to Italy. The preliminary report of the transport section of the Armeeoberkommando indicated that the buildup would require a total of 700 trains carrying operative loads and 350 trainloads of matériel to be moved into Italy. Assuming that there were no crises caused by coal shortages or strikes and that optimum loading and unloading conditions and schedules were met, at least fifty days would be required to complete the movement. There were several points at which bottlenecks could occur, however, since 365 of the 700 operative trains had to come from the Bukovina along a single rail line. The report concluded that this total transport effort could only be accomplished by severely limiting the number of leave trains, nearly halting all civilian traffic, and completely ceasing all material shipments on the eastern front that were not directly connected with the transfer to Italy. 35

These calculations of the Armeeoberkommando were, of course, based on optimum performance and optimum rail traffic, but there was no way that such a level of activity could be attained; the receiving facilities in Italy were not equal to the task. An indication

35 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.014, April 1, 1918.
of the magnitude of the logistical problem can be gained from a report submitted by Conrad's 11th army in mid-March. The average Austro-Hungarian infantry division (with its attached field artillery brigade) of 1918 required seventy tons of rations, thirty tons of munitions, and thirty tons of miscellaneous supplies for one day of positional warfare. For a major offensive, the expenditure of munitions would nearly triple and the amount of miscellaneous supplies would increase greatly. The report of the 11th army reached the pessimistic conclusion that even for normal day-to-day warfare the army needed 6,000 more horses for its supply and artillery trains and 2,000 more for use by the army's infantry components. The shortage of horses meant that the necessary supplies had to be transported forward from the railheads by manpower as a substitute for the pack animals. The influx of new units and the supplies for the offensive would overburden an already inadequate distribution network. In respect to the planned offensive, the report concluded, "with the means of transport presently under this army's command, the planned deployment of munitions as well as further transport cannot be carried out."36

The problems resulting from the Armeebkommando's haphazard planning and dilatoriness concerning a definite issuance of final attack instructions were causing a number of practical difficulties. Conrad's army group was suffering the most since the paucity of railroads into the rear areas inevitably caused congestion. Also,

36Eleventh Army Command to Armeebkommando Operations Division, March 17, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeebkommando Operations Division, 11th Army Command Quartermaster No. 3362 in Armeebkommando Operations No. 142.006 [n. d.].
even though Conrad had requested that orders be issued confirming
his attack plan, these orders had not been drafted. Consequently,
the 11th army staff was reluctant to commit itself irrevocably to
any one plan of deployment. Lack of definite instructions, however,
had not slowed the forward movement of troops from Russia and the
hinterlands. The worst feature of this transfer was that the Armee-
oberkommando was sending the troops forward before completing the
matériel buildup. It is difficult to discern the logic behind this
priority. The more men put at the end of an inadequate supply line,
the more supplies would have to be sent down that same supply line
just to maintain the status quo. If the supplies were sent to the
front first, they could be stockpiled for the offensive rather than
consumed. A stiff note was dispatched to the Armeeoberkommando con-
cerning the difficulties its procedure was causing: "the troops ar-
iving at this time find no victualing, their reduced trains no
fodder. Troops have to suffer from a shortage of necessary prepar-
ation." 37 After complaining about the lack of foresight in sending
troops forward before their supplies arrived, the army group staff
warned that unless the army group were given the labor and trans-
port necessary to prepare for the operation, the staff could not
guarantee meeting the scheduled completion date.

Throughout the buildup phase of the offensive, this lack of
adequate raillines and transport facilities continued to haunt

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37Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations Di-
vision, April 17, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeober-
kommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Conrad Operations
No. 15.000/31 in Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.035, April 17,
1918. This problem with the transfer schedule, like the difficulties
of the earlier reorganization of the army, demonstrates the incompe-
tency of the staffwork of the Armeeoberkommando under Arz's reign.
Conrad's army group, exactly as Krauß had warned and the Armeeoberkommando had feared. None of the railroads that approached the frontlines in the 11th army area could handle more than 300 tons of supplies per day; they were insufficient to keep even one infantry division adequately supplied.  

The lack of foresight displayed by the Armeeoberkommando in the priority allocated to order of arrival had induced a supply situation that was the reverse of what it should have been; the stockpile of matériel was dwindling rather than increasing. By May 27, 1918, the 11th army was forced to send an urgent message to Baden informing the Armeeoberkommando that the army had only three and one-half days of meal rations left and that no new shipments of rations had been scheduled. The message concluded: "under such circumstances, preparations for future action are entirely precluded."  

Complaints from Army Group Boroević paralleled the litany of woe from Conrad. The two most pressing problems for Boroević were the ever present shortage of horses and an inadequate number of artillery pieces. As of April 25, Boroević's armies were short by 15,260 horses. This meant that the army was incapable of moving supplies, artillery, or bridging trains forward once the Piave had

38 Eleventh Army Command Quartermaster Department to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, May 4, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, 11th Army Quartermaster Operations No. 5588 in Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.084, May 9, 1918.

39 Eleventh Army Command to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, May 27, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.165, May 27, 1918.
been crossed. While this shortage would render attack prepara-
tions difficult, it would also ensure that any success achieved by
the army could not be exploited.

An endemic shortcoming of the Armeerekommando was its ina-
ibility to understand the new role that artillery was playing in the
war—a failure in imagination that was shared by many combat com-
nanders. During the Caporetto campaign, General Krauß had waged
an epic struggle with the Armeerekommando to convince it of the
importance of a powerful artillery force; he had succeeded only by
sheer stubbornness. The initial stages of the summer campaign now
showed that the lesson had not yet been absorbed by the Armeere-
kommando. As an artillery brigade commander noted, "this event
showed anew that the leadership, at the end of four years of war,
had not yet mastered the nature of artillery." The same artil-
leryman was later driven to distraction by the commander of his in-
fantry division, who showed absolutely no interest in the question
of how the artillery was to coordinate its fire with the infantry
once the Piave had been crossed.

The state of Army Group Boroević's artillery army further

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40 Army Group Command Boroević to Armeerekommando Operations
Division, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeerekommando Operations Divi-
sion, Army Group Command Boroević Operations No. 1100/25 in Arme-
erekommando Operations No. 142/060, April 30, 1918. See also
Isonzo Army Command to Army Group Command Boroević, April 15, 1918,
Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeerekommando Operations Divi-
sion, Isonzo Army Command Operations No. 2236 in Armeerekommando
"Files without Numbers."

41 Krauß, Das Wunder von Karfreit, pp. 16-17.

42 Pengov, Die Wahrheit über die Piavenschlacht, p. 60.

43 Ibid., pp. 36-37.
demonstrates the magnitude of this problem. The 70th Honvéd artillery Brigade had spent three months in rehabilitation but was still 150 men short of its authorized strength and had received only 96 of the 400 horses it had requisitioned. The 51st and 64th Honvéd artillery brigades were completely incapable of movement since some of the batteries had only one to five horses for all needs. Other batteries in the army group were equipped with the wrong caliber guns, while one battery of the 64th heavy field artillery regiment had not a single usable gun. Worst of all, the army had only enough artillery ammunition for two days of heavy fighting.\textsuperscript{44}

By early June, with the planned date of the offensive only two weeks off, the situation was still discouraging. The 6th army was still short fifteen bridge trains, 4,880 wagon loads of material, and nearly all of its assault craft. The Isonzo army was still lacking thirteen bridge trains, eight engineer companies, and 167 artillery pieces.\textsuperscript{45} Even in instances when all demands appeared to have

\textsuperscript{44} Isonzo Army Command to Army Group Command Boroević, April 29, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeecombkommando Operations Division, Isonzo Army Operations No. 22036/12; Armeecombkommando Operations No. 142.072, May 3, 1918. See also Isonzo Army Command to Armeecombkommando Operations Division, April 17, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeecombkommando Operations Division, Isonzo Army Command Operations No. 10776 in Armeecombkommando Operations No. 142.052, April 24, 1918. The ammunition on hand amounted to 600 rounds per mountain gun, 500 rounds per field gun, 500 rounds for each field howitzer, 500 rounds for each mountain howitzer, 300 rounds for each 150 mm field howitzer, and 250 rounds for each 104 mm field gun. This should be compared with the 1914 British army regulations based on Boer War experience which required that units keep 528 rounds per field gun and 280 rounds per howitzer at all times, with 472 and 520 rounds respectively on the line of communication. Alan Clark, The Donkeys (New York: Award Books, 1965) p. 35, n. 2.

\textsuperscript{45} Army Group Command Boroević to Armeecombkommando Operations Division, June 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeecombkommando Operations Division, Armeecombkommando Operations No. 142.170.
been met there was a gap between paper strength and reality. Of the six fighter units assigned to the 6th army, with a paper allocation of 108 aircraft, only thirty-seven were able to fly. Of the sixty-six bombers assigned to the 6th army, only thirty were in flying condition. The most appalling fact of all was that several units were near starvation.

During this period of preparation the Armeeoberkommando was under a great deal of pressure from sources other than the generals on the Italian front. The German High Command was urging Arz to speed up his preparations in Italy in order to reduce the burden on the Germans fighting in France.

In April two events occurred which finally shattered all Austrian autonomy regarding German wishes. The food situation in Austria, particularly in Vienna, had been becoming more and more desperate during the spring of 1918. Finally, on April 17 General Landwehr, the man in charge of victualling all of Austria, gave the army twenty wagons of grain and the city of Vienna thirty wagons. These allocations represented the last grain reserves within the monarchy. On April 26 he attempted to arrange a meeting with the German High Command to discuss some kind of arrangement over the distribution of the newly harvested Romanian grain. The Germans brusquely

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46 Army Group Command Boroević to Armeeoberkommando, July 23, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 490, Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1781; Army Group Command Boroević Operations No. 985/2.

47 This particular incident will be covered in greater detail in the following chapter which discusses the spring and summer of 1918 from the viewpoint of the common soldiers who were enduring a great deal of suffering during this period.
refused to talk to him. At this point he decided that he had no choice if he was to save the city of Vienna and the army from starvation; on his own authority (which was non-existent) General Landwehr ordered Austria troops in Galicia to hijack 2,455 wagons of corn from the Germans. This was done on April 30. Neither the city nor the army was going to starve, and as General Landwehr remarked "now the Germans were ready to talk to me." The Germans, of course, were furious.

Still, the matter might have been forgiven if the hijacking had not followed directly on the heels of the Sixtus Affair. The Sixtus Affair was typical of the well intentioned efforts that Emperor Charles was inclined to make, and, like most of them, it went awry. The full details cannot be discussed here, but basically the emperor had extended peace feelers to the Entente through the offices of his brother-in-law, Prince Sixtus of Parma. The German emperor was aware of this effort to achieve peace and had given it his unofficial blessing. The peace feeler collapsed, and the matter was nearly forgotten until the Austrian foreign minister, Count Ottokar Czernin, ill-advisedly referred to it in a speech in early April. The French became highly incensed and, after some verbal exchanges, they released the entire text of a letter that Charles had written to them. To many people, including the German High Command, it appeared that the Austrians had attempted to betray their ally by obtaining a covert and unilateral peace. The combination of the Sixtus Affair with the hijacking by General Landwehr threatened to cause a real rift between the two allies. In order to patch up their disagreements, a meeting

48 Landwehr, Hunger, pp. 189-92.
was arranged at Spa. Both emperors would attend, accompanied by their chiefs of staff.49

The Spa conference has sometimes been called "Charles' Canossa," but this is not an apt description. Charles emerged from the affair with his honor intact, and since William had known about the Sixtus Affair from the beginning, he could not berate Charles too harshly. Some concession had to be made to smooth the German High Command's ruffled feathers, however and the result was the so-called "Waffenbund." Although this document appeared to bind Austria-Hungary irrevocably to Germany, the ties were more symbolic than actual. The clauses of the agreement set up a unified command structure and bound both countries to inform the other before taking any military actions.50 Other clauses agreed to standardize weapons and equipment in the future. In truth, the Waffenbund was no more of a threat to Austrian sovereignty than the Supreme War Council was to the independence of the Entente Powers. The agreement could not be enforced and the only potentially detrimental factor was that the signing of it seemed to indicate to the Entente Powers that Austria-Hungary was completely committed to German war aims.51

49 The Sixtus Affair was complex and needs a thorough treatment in order to be judged; such an attempt is not made here. Maechling's "The Sixtus Affair," gives a complete account as does Brook-Shepherd's The Last Habsburg. Robert Kann's The Sixtus Affair should also be consulted.

50 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1572, May 14, 1918, contains several drafts of the Waffenbund plus other interesting information concerning the Spa conference. Unfortunately the file is incomplete.

51 It is interesting that at the end of the meeting, Arz described the imminent offensive in Italy to the Germans as an attack between the Brenta and Piave rivers.
As a result of the Spa conference, Austria-Hungary's differences with Germany were put into temporary abeyance, but the monarchy still faced difficulties at home. In addition to the inadequate food supply, Austria-Hungary was beset by other problems which boded ill for the future. Nationalist agitation had reached such a state that it was openly discussed in newspapers, despite censorship of the press. Conrad's army group staff was so disturbed by this development that it protested to the Armeoberkommando that "our newspapers, especially the Slavic ones," were the most effective propaganda weapon that the Italians possessed. They did not have to compose propaganda but merely shower the Austrian lines with copies of newspapers from within the empire, was the officers' verdict.52

Morale problems within the army were to grow apace for the rest of the war. A frequent source of the decline in morale was the depressing news from the homeland. Just before the beginning of the June offensive the Armeoberkommando circulated a number of press clippings to subordinate intelligence staffs to illustrate how far war weariness and nationalist sentiment had progressed within the monarchy.53 Austro-Hungarian commanders on the Italian front must have been disturbed to learn that these frailties were

52Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group to Armeoberkommando Operations Division, April 26, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, unnumbered, n. d., "Sitzung am 26. April 1918. Frontpropaganda."

53Armeoberkommando to Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, June 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeoberkommando Operations No. 766/136 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group Operations No. 25950/9, June 5, 1918.
not confined to civilians. Rumors were floating around the front lines that the Czech and Slovak troops on the Italian front were planning a revolt.\textsuperscript{54} While this latter assertion proved to be only a rumor, it indicates the shaky condition of the empire as a whole. Even Emperor Charles was seriously worried the collapse of the monarchy was imminent, and he was reassured only when he was advised that a successful offensive in Italy would be the best remedy for the empire’s faltering morale.\textsuperscript{55}

Intelligence reports indicated both good and bad news coming from Italy. A series of reports estimated that the Italian army had lost approximately 2,250,000 casualties thus far in the war; about 988,000 of them were considered permanent casualties. Most encouraging was the conclusion of the report, which stated: "our army can seek a decision over the Italian army with full faith, because the initiative of the junior officers can play an overwhelming role."\textsuperscript{56} Other reports stated that the king and the highest military leaders of Italy no longer fully trusted the defensive capabilities of the soldiers and that they had gone so far as to cancel

\textsuperscript{54}Armeeoberkommando Operations Division to 11th Army Command, May 3, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 449, 11th Army Command General Staff Section [Intelligence], 11th Army Command Enemy Propaganda No. 2219, May 13, 1918.

\textsuperscript{55}Bardolf, \textit{Soldat im alten Österreich}, p. 313.

\textsuperscript{56}Armeeoberkommando Chief of the General Staff to Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, May 12, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, \textit{Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group}, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence No. 20850/7. See also Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, \textit{Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group}, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence No. 20750/23, May 11, 1918. This was a strange conclusion to reach since the Austro-Hungarian army had been worried about the quality of its junior officers ever since 1914.
leaves into Switzerland in order to stop desertion. 57

There was more than enough pessimistic intelligence to offset the good news. First, there was a speech by an American official promising that American troops were on the way to Italy; second, a radio intercept was made which indicated that the Italians felt that the arrival of American troops was imminent. These incidents gave impetus to the haste of the Austrian preparations. 58

While this particular rumor about American intervention was to remain a recurring rumor for the rest of 1918, there was another piece of intelligence which was even more worrisome. Throughout May and right up to the date of the offensive the Italians appeared to know exactly what the Austrians were planning to do. On May 2 a report from the German liaison officer to his headquarters in Spa stated that the Italians not only expected a great offensive but believed that it would be carried out by Conrad's army group down both banks of the Brenta. 59 A report later in May from the 11th army also contained the information that the Italians, believing that an attack was being prepared, were feverishly strengthening their defenses

57 Armeenoberkommando Operations Division to Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, May 9, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna) Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeenoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 40.142/133 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 20850/19, May 12, 1918.

58 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Evidence Group, Operations No. 24650/12, May 31, 1918.

59 German Intelligence Officer with Army Group Command Conrad to German Supreme Army Command, May 2, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, un-numbered, May 2, 1918.
along the Brenta. A more detailed report from May 31 stated that
the Italians appeared to have finished their defensive preparations
and had increased their patrol and artillery activity opposite the
10th army. Finally, on June 13, Conrad's army group reported that
the enemy had constructed extraordinarily strong defenses in the vi-
cinity of the Grappa Massif and that, although Italian troop morale
seemed to be poor, the Italian officers were not worried about the
security of their position.

Despite some rather discouraging bits of information, the
Armeeoberkommando was still convinced that things were going badly
within the Entente camp. A report based on a survey of Italian news-
papers showed that the German offensive on the Western Front had im-
pressed the Italians and caused them to worry for their own safety.
A planned withdrawal of Entente troops from Italy to bolster the de-
fense of France, coupled with constant rumors of an Austro-Hungarian
offensive against Italy, had led to great consternation among the
war-weary Italians. Interrogations of prisoners of war had shown

60. Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 445, 11th Army Command General
Staff Section, Enemy Intelligence No. 820, n. d.: "Monatsbericht
Über die Lage beim Feind--Mai 1918."

61. Tenth Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intel-
ligence Group, May 29, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army
Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, 10th Army Command
Enemy Intelligence No. 4394/Feind in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy
Intelligence Group No. 24950/12, May 31, 1918.

62. Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad
Enemy Intelligence Group, No. 27550/12, June 13, 1918.

63. Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 486, Armeeoberkommando Secret
Operations No. 1492, April 26, 1918: "Über die Lage XII. 23. März
bis 25. April 1918."
that the English and American soldiers (the Americans in Italy at this time were primarily volunteer ambulance drivers such as Ernest Hemingway or pilots with the Royal Air Force) serving in Italy were disenchanted with the Italians and believed that the Italians mainly liked American and British gold. Under questioning, a French prisoner of war captured near Asiago revealed that although the Entente defenses there were among the strongest the Frenchman had ever seen, French morale was low. He stated that the French army had no storm units left and that the French in Italy were "very war-weary." Such signs of discontent boded well for the Austrians—if the stories could be believed.

Arz was being made very uncomfortable now by increasing German pressure to get the offensive under way. The chief of staff has often made it clear that the primary reason for rushing preparations for the offensive was to satisfy the German desire to distract attention from the Western Front. This pressure from the German High Command accelerated as reports reached it about the withdrawal of French and British units from Italy and about the possible withdrawal of Italian units from Italy for use in France. The latter rumor was widespread; it reached the Armeeoberkommando from several sources and at frequent intervals. The Italian soldiers were evidently

64 Eleventh Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad, April 30, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad En-
emy Intelligence Group, 11th Army Command Intelligence No. 676 in
Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 18950/15,
May 1, 1918.

65 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad
Enemy Intelligence Group No. 20350/18, May 9, 1918 (Prisoner of war interrogations).
deathly afraid of being sent to the Western Front and with every re-
ocurrence of this rumor, fresh waves of Italian deserters would
enter the Austro-Hungarian lines. 66

Quarrels with Conrad were only one of the preoccupations of
the Armeeoberkommando, so preparations for the offensive ground for-
ward despite uncertainties over the final allocation of resources
and the location of the schwipunkt. 67 Still, the question had to
be decided quickly. Despite his repeated rebuffs when he requested
more men and supplies, Conrad had still believed he was conducting
the main attack and all the other attacks were merely secondary or
diversionary operations. He was soon to be disillusioned. Conrad's
army group had been provided with only fifty fighter aircraft and
ninety observation planes—a force entirely inadequate for the task
of gaining air superiority over his part of the front. He now re-
quested a great increase in air strength and with his request sub-
mitted the outline of an operational plan for their use. Conrad's
message closed with the observation that it was ridiculous to deprive

66 See Ludendorff to Cramon, April 23, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vi-
enna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, German High
Command J. No. 6982 in Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.044,
April 24, 1918. For other reports of troops transfers see Army
Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group to Armeeoberkommando
Operations Division, May 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60,
Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeeoberkom-
mando Operations No. 42.142/131 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy
Intelligence Group Operations No. 18750/20, May 1, 1918; and Kriegs-
archiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelli-
gence Group Operations No. 21550/5, May 15, 1918.

67 "Schwerpunk" is one of those untranslatable German words.
In military terminology it means the point of the enemy line at
which the main attacking force will concentrate its strength. With-
in this context, it has become an acceptable English usage.
the main assault of air cover and assign it instead to the secondary operation on the Piave. His request was brusquely denied by the Armeoberkommando with the explanation that, since flying conditions were likely to be superior over the Piave, Boroević would get the bulk of the Austrian air force to support his attack. 68

At this point it was becoming evident that the offensive was not going to be carried out in accordance with the orders issued in March or with the "agreement" made during the meeting at Baden. In actuality, the "main attack" between the Astico and Piave had been slowly and quietly converted to a new concept: the strategic plan that had been promoted by Arz and Waldstätten. Until the beginning of May the attack by Army Group Boroević was a "major diversionary operation and demonstration" but all of this was changed on May 8, 1918, when Boroević received a new operational order. In view of Waldstätten's statement that Conrad's attack should be "no stronger than necessary" and "as weak as possible" and Conrad's continuing and futile requests for men and supplies, the contents of Boroević's new instructions reveal the full extent of the double-dealing that Arz and Waldstätten were engaged in:

The 11th army command is only generally oriented about the extent of 'Albrecht' and for the present should remain so. It is fully in accordance with the intentions of the Armeeoberkommando that the 11th army make all preparations in the belief that they alone must bring about the decision. The Armeeoberkommando is, of course, 

68 Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, May 5, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fass. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Conrad Operations No. 15.000/95 in Armeeoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 142.085, May 7, 1918. It is interesting that Conrad's air plan was remarkably "modern." The air force was to destroy the enemy planes on the ground by a dawn raid; all planes were then to interdict the battlefield and work in close support of the infantry.
completely aware that success can only lie in the serious intention [Wollen] of "Radetzky" and "Albrecht" as fully equivalent operations.\textsuperscript{69}

The meaning of the message was clear: Conrad's attack had been downgraded, and the Armeeoberkommando intended that he should not discover this fact. In view of the later blame that was attached to Conrad for his failure on the mountain front, this duplicity is very revealing. He was deliberately starved of men and supplies, not given the forces that he believed to be the minimum necessary for success, lied to about the strategic operational plan, and then made the scapegoat for the failure of the June Offensive.

It is difficult to grasp what Arz and Waldstätten were thinking about in pursuing this particular strategy since both army groups were far short of the strength each considered necessary to achieve success. To keep both army groups weaker than they desired in an effort to obtain a balanced attack did not guarantee victory; rather it insured that both wings of the offensive would court defeat. One author had advanced the suggestion that Arz and Waldstätten were hoping to exert pressure along the whole length of the front and intended to use the four divisions that had been formed into the Armeeoberkommando reserve as a decisive force to be committed at whatever point the Italian line appeared to be giving way.\textsuperscript{70} This interpretation has some merit; the Austrian army had been brought to the brink of disaster by a similar strategy used by the Russian

\textsuperscript{69} Quoted in Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. II, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{70} Kiszling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen Front," p. 33.
General Brusilov in 1916, and the Armeoberkommando may have hoped the Austrians could enjoy equal success with this ploy.

Kiszling's suggestion, however, has two objections that can be raised against it. First, the mountains of northern Italy are not the plains of Galicia. Reserve divisions cannot be so easily shuttled about in the broken and roadless terrain. Second, an examination of the placement of the Armeoberkommando reserve shows that the Armeoberkommando was being influenced by its preconceptions as to the course of the battle. It was sure that Conrad's attack would not succeed, and it is obvious that none of the four divisions in the Armeoberkommando reserve could reach Conrad's front in time to be effective. The 9th infantry division could reach the area of the corps attacking the Grappa Massif, but only the Armeoberkommando believed that success could come in that area (see map on p. 148). The three remaining divisions were positioned to reinforce a successful crossing of the Piave between Papadopoli and the Montello. This placement of reserves lends credence to the theory that Arz and Waldstätten intended to circumvent the orders implicit in the emperor's acceptance of Conrad's attack plan. They did not seem to realize that by attempting to reach their goal by subterfuge rather than by direct action they were only flirting with disaster at all levels.

There can be no doubt that the orders to carry out this deception came primarily from Arz and Waldstätten. When Borojević complained about the shortage of infantry divisions that were allotted to his army group, he received a reply from the Armeoberkommando assuring him that he would have at least nineteen-and-one-half divisions at his disposal and that he could depend on more than one
division from the Armeerekommando reserve. The message repeated the earlier affirmation of the importance of "Albrecht" and ended with the enigmatic statement that "even within the Armeeoberkommando only a few sections are informed about the true extent of 'Albrecht.'" 71 What is even more remarkable is Arz's assertion at this time that "Albrecht" had always been considered an "equally important" operation. 72

Conrad was not yet certain that his part in the campaign had been downgraded, but there is little doubt that he was assailed on all sides by suspicions. On May 12 he repeated his belief to the Armeeoberkommando that his army group was to carry out the decisive action, while the Tonale Pass and the Piave were "side actions." Why then, he asked, was he not given sufficient air power to achieve air superiority on his front? Why was the bulk of the air force assigned to secondary operations? 73 As usual, he did not receive any satisfactory reply to this question.

A further indication that Conrad was beginning to have some doubts about the role of his army group in the offensive was his reaction to the problems of the XV corps, which formed the easternmost extension of his line and which had been ordered to assault the Grappa Massif. Considering the magnitude of the task that faced

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72 Pötzl, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 59.

73 Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, May 12, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division; Army Group Command Conrad Operations No. 20.000/28 in Armeeoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 142.102, May 15, 1918.
his corps, the commander was fuming over the fact that the 298 artillery pieces that had been assigned to him were entirely insufficient to the job. He insisted that he needed a minimum of sixty-seven more batteries, at least half of which had to be heavy artillery.  

When no action was forthcoming on this request, he again demanded that he be assigned more artillery. Conrad forwarded the second letter to the Armeeoberkommando, with a covering statement that it was not the intention of the army group to strengthen the XV corps at the expense of what he perceived to be the primary goals of the 11th army.  

What makes this incident important is that Conrad in effect completely rejected the Armeeoberkommando plan for a major thrust between the Brenta and the Piave. It can be interpreted as a veiled message to the Armeeoberkommando warning it that, if it intended to deprive him of the necessary men and supplies for his attack, he could do the same thing. First priority was going to be given to his own theory, and if the Armeeoberkommando wished to dictate the occurrence and preparation of secondary operations, it would have to come up with more men and matériel.

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74 Army Group Command Boroević to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, May 4, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Boroevic Operations No. 1100/42 in Armeeoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 142.078, May 6, 1918. It is puzzling why the XV corps made this request through Boroević rather than through his own army group. For a corps commander to venture outside of channels was nearly unheard of.

75 Fifteenth Corps Command to Army Group Command Conrad, May 15, 1918, and Conrad to Armeeoberkommando, May 24, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, XV Corps Operations No., 157/28 and Army Group Command Conrad Operations No. 20.000/70 in Armeeoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 142.142, May 26, 1918.
Despite the bickering and backstabbing, preparations for the offensive were nearly complete, not because the requirements were being met, but because necessity dictated it. As early as mid-April, the 11th army had asked the Armeeoberkommando how much time remained for preparations and had been informed that the date was tentatively set for June 11. The Armeeoberkommando gave "state necessity" as the reason for this date and adduced three reasons for rushing the preparations: (1) food rations were becoming smaller and smaller, and no improvement could be foreseen; (2) public opinion within Austria-Hungary was forcing the monarchy to achieve a rapid victory of some kind; and, (3) no increase in transport capabilities could be expected. The 11th army agreed to do everything in its power to meet this completion date but pleaded for more laborers and engineers. The Armeeoberkommando agreed to meet this demand. 76 This agreement, like so many others, was not kept.

By June 1, 1918, the 11th army was still far from ready, but its officers calculated that they would have all their preparations complete by June 15 at the latest. 77 Considering the delays that had already occurred, this message appears to be sheer optimism—and it was. Their message to the Armeeoberkommando on May 31 indicated that the 11th army was still short of men and supplies in nearly every category, and that these shortages would not be ameliorated by June 15. Nonetheless, the 11th army was willing to assume the

76. Resume of correspondence for May 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 296, 11th Army Command War Diary, Vol. VIII, pp. 2,998-3,000.

77. Entries for May 31, 1918, and June 1, 1918, ibid., Vol. VIII, pp. 3,020-23.
offensive on that day simply because it did not appear that the situation would improve. This may well have been the most pessimistic reason for beginning an offensive at a given date ever recorded.

Boroévič's army group was in little better condition. On May 28, 1918, the field marshal reported to Baden that no responsible person could start an offensive with insufficient matériel and with undernourished and depressed soldiers. To do so would be the action of an "adventurer." He urged the postponement of the offensive until all preparations were completed. Although Boroévič stated that his army group could not be ready to attack before June 25th, the Armeeoberkommando refused to delay the offensive, alleging that Conrad's army group would be ready by the 15th.

At this point an episode occurred which amazes any observer about the lack of foresight within the Austro-Hungarian planning staffs. Now that the Isonzo army was ready to attack, but only under protest, and that the 11th army was resigned to its fate a new hitch developed. Major General Ludwig Goiginger, commander of the XXIV corps of the Archduke Joseph's 6th army, announced that the assignment given to his corps in the attack plan was impossible to execute under the circumstances. The XXIV corps was to cross the Piave

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78. Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, May 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Group Command Conrad Operations No. 20.000/97a, in Armeeoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 142.175, June 1, 1918.

79. Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, pp. 316-17. This appears to be an instance in which the Armeeoberkommando used the jealousy of the two army groups as a spur to speed their preparations. Conrad's army group was not going to be "ready" by June 15, but it had been told by the Armeeoberkommando that the attack had to occur on that date under any circumstances.
as the westernmost wing of Boroević's attack and was then to protect that flank during the advance. The problem was that the plan called for the corps to set up this defensive shoulder along the base of the Montello, leaving that mountain in Italian hands. If the Italians collapsed quickly, this situation would pose no problem but if they resisted, the entire flank of the Austrian attack would become untenable since the Montello would not only form a bastion of defense but would leave the only high observation point for the center course of the Piave in Italian hands.

The first reaction of the Armeeoberkommando to Goiginger's objection was to cancel the attack of the XXIV corps and order the transfer of the freed divisions to assist the crossing at Papadopoli. Boroević pointed out, however, that it was too late to make such a transfer since no transport was available to shift the artillery positions at such a late date. The Armeeoberkommando reluctantly agreed and ordered the XXIV corps to conduct an "in house" attack directly across the Piave and attempt to take the Montello. This order went out to Goiginger on the same day the final date for the offensive was made official. The date was to be June 15, 1918, and the battle was to become an Austrian mid-summer night's dream.

80 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 191. See Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 16, Major General Ludwig Goiginger, "Die Piaveforcierung und die Erstürmung des Montello (Juni)," for the corps commander's story of the planning and the operation. An "in house" attack was the Armeeoberkommando's euphemism for an attack with no outside aid or supplies.

81 Armeeoberkommando Operations Division to Army Group Commands Conrad and Boroević, June 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Operations No. 142.171.
There were further complications, of course. On June 13 Boroević notified the Armeeoberkommando that both of his armies were reporting fog and rain, which would render the proposed gas barrage useless, and that river reports indicated that the Piave would rise to a height which would make the crossing of it hazardous, if not impossible. Consequently, he requested a further delay of three days in the deadline for the attack. Waldstätten refused his request, explaining that the Tonale Pass operation was already under way and that the troops of the 11th army had moved into forward trenches and could not be withdrawn without unacceptable casualties from interdiction fire. Boroević was told that a final decision on whether "Albrecht" would go forward would be made on the evening of the 14th, but that "Radetzky" would have to begin on the 15th, with or without an offensive across the Piave. No further delays occurred, and on the night of the 14-15th of June the Austrian army on the Italian front moved into its final jump-off positions.

Planning and preparation for the great Austro-Hungarian offensive had been haphazard, undirected, and often self-contradicting. Now that the attack was beginning, there was considerable doubt among the Austrian leadership that the offensive would achieve its ends. The battle and its outcome had begun to assume an overwhelming

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83 Armeeoberkommando to Army Group Command Boroević, June 13, 1918, ibid., Pt. IV, Operations No. 142.218, p. 120. See also Waldstätten to Arz, June 14, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Hofzug Stücke.
importance to everyone in the empire. So many hopes rode on the success of the battle that a failure would carry disaster beyond the real importance of a military setback. "The expected victory over the Italians had already, in imagination, become a matter of fact for the emperor, all of Austria-Hungary, and for the majority of the army leadership before the battle was even fought."  

This statement may have been true for the civilian sector of the population, but it is questionable so far as the army leadership was concerned.

The enterprise was questioned from the very top on down. Emperor Charles was known to have said that he had no doubts as to the spirit of the army but was very anxious about the final strategy that had been adopted.  

When even Charles began to notice that something was amiss in general strategy, there is every indication that the situation was truly desperate. While Charles was merely anxious, his chief of staff was acting in a highly ambivalent manner. Although he continued to put on a good show for the Germans and his public, his private utterances were less sanguine. When Windischgrätz questioned him "whether he reckoned with certainty on the success of this gigantic undertaking in the South-west, he made the Delphic remark that the operation was a foreign political necessity."  

Later, when asked about the morale and fighting ability of

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84 Feldl, Das verspielte Reich, p. 220.
86 Ibid., p. 185.
the troops, he merely shrugged his shoulders. 87

Of the two army commanders, Conrad is the one whose true feel-
ings are the hardest to discern. To all outward appearances, he was
confident and determined to achieve a success that would vindicate
his lifelong convictions. His messages to and from the Armeeober-
kommando have demonstrated, however, that he was more resigned and
was merely determined to do his best with inadequate resources.
There is no doubt that Boroević was pessimistic. He was convinced
from the beginning that the plans for the operation "held the germs
of failure." 88 He believed that the total strength of the Austro-
Hungarian army was probably sufficient but he felt that it had been
wrongly deployed. 89 Long after the war was over Boroević still
castigated Charles, Arz, and Conrad for their blundering conduct of
the battle and their failure to listen to his objections. 90 His
chief of staff, Anton Pitreich, was no more cheerful when contem-
plating the imminent battle. He confided that he believed that only
an "adept use of artillery" and a "knowledge of moral and tactical
superiority" over the Italians would compensate for the lack of
munitions--surely a cold comfort. 91

Several other generals also expressed less than enthusiastic
opinions. Archduke Joseph indicated that although he felt the total

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87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., p. 187.
89 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 191.
90 Boroević to Bolgar, Neue Freie Presse, February 3, 1929, p. 4.
91 Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, p. 317.
number of men and munitions was sufficient, they were being squandered over too great an extent of front. 92 Brigadier General Sundermann, the chief of staff for the 11th army, stated after the war that he had become opposed to the offensive due to the continuing inadequacy of munitions. 93 Krauß, after much disagreement with the plan of campaign, was kicked upstairs, and by the time of the offensive he commanded all Austrian forces in the Ukraine. Although his presence in Russia simplified liaison with the Germans, who admired Krauß greatly, it was surely a ridiculous employment for the best corps and army commander that the Austro-Hungarian monarchy possessed. His final comment of the June Battle was: "Yes, one probably had to attack everywhere and make a lot of noise, but only one assault, to which one had to allocate all attainable resources, had to be considered the main attack." 94

Two corps commanders were also upset with the situation. One of them (probably General Csanaday, commander of the VIII corps of the 11th army) told General Krauß that he had little trust in, and few optimistic hopes [schöpferische Voraussicht] for the undertaking since the attack had to be made with insufficient heavy artillery against lines held by the English. 95 The commander of the XV corps was even more vehement in his objections than the other

93 Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, pp. 41-42.
95 Kraüß, Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage, p. 251.
commanders. His corps was slated to attack the Grappa Massif but had been denied men and supplies and given practically no artillery since both army group commanders were adamantly opposed to the idea of an attack in his sector. In a fiery message to both the 6th army command and the Armeeoberkommando, General Karl Scotti charged that the whole process of preparation had "impaired the trust in the higher leadership and thereby curtailed the trust in success." He concluded his missive with the admonition: "the circumstances under which the XV corps had to undertake its attack will at all events remain for all time a textbook example of how it should not be done." 96

Finally, General Bardolff concluded in his memoirs that the last operation of the army in the war had violated every principle of concentration of force that had been learned in four years of war. 97

Why then was the attack carried out? The answer probably lies in the statement made by Boroević's chief of staff, a man opposed to the offensive: "one cannot simply give in without appealing at least once more to the luck of the weapons." 98 The leaders had doubts about the final strategic concept and a few even questioned the need for the offensive, but they tended not to question the common soldiers' loyalty, steadfastness, and will to win. They trusted them to overcome all difficulties to defeat the despised Italians. The

96 Fifteenth Corps Command to 6th Army Command and Armeeoberkommando, June 4, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, XV Corps Command Operations No. 157/64, in Armeeoberkommando Operations Division Operations No. 142.188, June 7, 1918.

97 Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, p. 315.

common soldiers were not asked what they thought of this theory of warfare.

"Twas theirs not to reason why" was the statement made about a group of men in similar circumstances a little over sixty years previously, but another and more apt statement is, "someone had blundered." In this case, there were more than enough blunders to be shared by a number of generals. Conrad and Boroević can claim their share of blame since they were tempted by the hope of glory to conduct operations which they really believed to be inadequately supported. Although Conrad was the only man ultimately sacked for the pending failure, neither he nor Boroević were ultimately responsible for what happened. It was not their fault that they were the type of men and personalities that they were. Whether or not their plans were wrong, theirs was not the final responsibility for the plan of campaign. Neither of them was given the resources that they requested, and under such circumstances they cannot be blamed for doing their jobs. Each believed himself to be correct in his assessment of the situation and so advised his superiors. Consequently, the final decisions and failures originated from above.

How much blame should be accorded to Emperor Charles is difficult to assess. His first and primary mistake was in appointing a yes-man as his chief of staff; after that point there should be no surprise if the man says "yes." As the supreme commander of the army, the emperor had the final say on what plans were to be put into operation; for this information he was dependent on his chief of staff for the proper facts and figures. Although his chief of staff had recommended against the acceptance of Conrad's plan, the emperor
overruled him and ordered the plan to be put into operation. This was within his sphere of command. Having taken this action, it was the emperor's right to expect his chief of staff and the Armeeoberkommando to take the necessary steps to implement the plan without making difficulties. This did not happen, and there is no evidence that Charles was ever fully informed of the implications of the changes made in the plan that he had endorsed. If he was not aware of these changes, it was the direct fault of Arz, his chief of staff.

Waldstätten's role is difficult to ascertain. As the chief of the operations section of the Armeeoberkommando, it was his task to remain fully aware of the strength and capabilities of the army and to pass this information along to the chief of staff. There is absolutely no doubt that because of the problems of supply on the mountain front, he felt the army incapable of undertaking Conrad's plan of operations.99 Under these circumstances, it was his duty to object as strongly as possible to his superior, Arz, which he did. If he felt that Arz was not giving his arguments sufficient consideration, he had other alternatives such as appealing directly to the emperor or threatening resignation. Arz did, however, heed his protestations so he had done his duty.

Under normal circumstances, Waldstätten's responsibility for events would have ended at this point. It has been mentioned earlier that Arz had become more and more of an adjutant to the emperor, rather than a chief of staff, and that as a result, Waldstätten was the man in the Armeeoberkommando who really ran the general staff.

99 Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 53.
and made the intellectual decisions. Lacking the real authority to take many of these actions, he used personal diplomacy and spoke with the authority of Arz, even when Arz did not necessarily know what was happening. There is nothing wrong with this procedure since Arz had delegated the authority to him; there is also no evidence that Arz ever repudiated anything that Waldstätten did when speaking ex cathedra. However this system can lead to an acceptance of subterfuge as a permissible part of the job. It is possible that many of the difficulties that arose in connection with the planning for the offensive, and the deceptions connected with derailing Conrad's plan, can be traced directly to Waldstätten rather than Arz—but this can only be surmised. There is also one final question about Waldstätten's role in the June Battle planning. If he was convinced that the monarchy was incapable of undertaking Conrad's plan of operations, why did he endorse Boroević's extensive attack plan and advocate the Monte Grappa and Tonale Pass operations against the advice of both army group commanders?

All of this brings the matter back to Arz. Arz could have and should have been more forceful in opposing Conrad's plan if he really believed it to be so dangerous. This he utterly failed to do. After scoring Conrad's plan for being too grandiose, he was ordered to accept it, after which he proceeded to add a great deal more scope to it. If Conrad's plan was beyond possibility, why add the Piave, Grappa and Tonale operations to it? Certainly Waldstätten had endorsed them, but Arz was supposedly a knowledgable and more experienced officer; moreover, he had the final responsibility. The final plan that Arz accepted has been spoken of as a compromise and it
was—but it was a compromise without the full knowledge and consent of the emperor or either of the army group commanders involved.

We will perhaps never know what Arz's motivations were. It is possible that he was trying to quietly shift the forces from Conrad to Boroević in order to discredit Conrad and prove his own plan correct. Conrad was once Arz's superior and still had a higher actual rank; Arz may have been trying to subvert a man who had the respect and reputation that Arz did not. It is possible that Arz was working from the most unselfish of motives and was merely trying to save the army from the disaster he was sure awaited it in the mountains and woods of the Asiago front.

Whatever his motivations, there can be no gainsaying the fact that the chief of staff was not performing his duty in a proper manner. Arz had the final say in the matter of advising the emperor, and in this position he was ultimately responsible for all decisions emanating from the Armeoberkommando. If he was acting more like an adjutant than a chief of staff, this was his own fault. Rather than acting in a decisive manner he acquiesced to a plan he sincerely believed to be wrong, endorsed an extension of the front beyond all the lessons of the war, and actively participated in the deliberate deception of a superior officer and army group commander.

Arz's earlier reputed intelligent and active leadership seems to have dissipated in the court atmosphere and been replaced by a timidity and servility that had not previously been a part of his character. The problem only accentuated Charles' own weakness, and between the emperor and his chief of staff there was a vacuum in the decision-making process. Under such circumstances, the outcome of
the Piave action was a foregone conclusion unless the individual infantrymen could remedy the mistakes of their commanders.
CHAPTER V

"I AM HEALTHY, EVERYTHING IS GOING WELL" ¹

It is perhaps a truism, but a fact nevertheless, that the final success of any battle is ultimately dependent on the infantryman; yet the soldiers are the factor that historians most often ignore or dismiss with a sweeping generalization. It can be of great interest, and importance as well, to examine more closely this arbiter of battles. What were his concerns? How was he treated? What efforts were made to win his allegiance to a cause? What were the enemies' efforts to shake his resolve? What was the attitude of the Austro-Hungarian soldier about the upcoming offensive, and how did the commanders assess his feelings? If the answers to these questions cannot be determined with exactness, it is not because they are unanswerable, and it does not indicate that they should not be asked, but it merely reemphasizes the fact that soldiers are not a homogeneous body but rather an aggregate of men with differing motives and values. Answering the questions that have been posed leads to a better understanding of the Austro-Hungarian army and exposes its weaknesses and strengths as well as, and perhaps better.
than, an analysis of its actions in combat.

Generals may have been worrying about strategy, logistics, tactics, and the probability for success in the upcoming battles, but the troops were concerned with more mundane matters, and during the spring and early summer of 1918 the primary focus of conversation and interest was food. "Chow" has been one of the traditional sources of griping in all armies, but seldom have the complaints been so justified as those of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers of this time.

During peacetime the duties of a soldier were generally considered as medium heavy work requiring about 3,500 calories of food intake per day to maintain energy and good health. The bulk of this caloric intake was normally furnished by approximately 17.5 ounces of carbohydrates (in the form of potatoes, bread, or other grain products), 3.5 ounces of fat (primarily butter and cooking oil), and 4.13 ounces of protein, of which at least one third should be in the form of meat (7.35 ounces of lean meat would provide the necessary amount of protein). During war time the duties of a soldier were re-rated as heavy work, and the expected caloric intake rose to 4,000 calories per day. Under this circumstance the carbohydrate ration was to be maintained at the same level but the fat ration was to be increased to 5.25 ounces and the protein ration to 5.08 ounces (9.03 ounces of meat).²

²Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 15, anonymous, "Verpflegungslage der H. Gr. F. H. von Boroevic im Zeitraum vom I. I. bis 15. VI. 1918," p. 4. A term which will be used throughout this discussion is Mehl. It is a generic term and usually means potatoes, grain, or any food made from the various grains.
In reality, these levels of food rations were very seldom met after the early days of the war, and during the food crisis of 1917-1918 the daily rations dropped precipitously. In December, 1917, the theoretical rations to be issued to the men in the front lines consisted of 16.45 ounces of Mehl per day and approximately 3.5 ounces of meat per week.\(^3\) Even this was an optimistic estimate, however. Some divisions received only 4.38 ounces of "terrible cornbread"\(^4\) and 2.45 ounces of meat per man per day. If the division received a higher allotment of bread, it often got no meat for weeks at a time.\(^5\)

Probably the nadir of the food crisis was reached in February and March of 1918. Parts of the Isonzo army were without bread for a brief period\(^6\) and the reserve food supply for Boroević's army group was reduced to five and one-half days of rations. In one regiment "the daily ration of nearly worthless cornbread sank to 4.2 ounces; not more than a third of the theoretical seven ounce meat ration could be had."\(^7\) Because of the prevailing starvation and

\(^3\)Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 12.

\(^4\)Maišbrot is not really cornbread, as Americans understand it, but a bread made from maize. It is dark brown, somewhat sour, and is often made from what Americans would consider animal-fodder-quality maize.


\(^6\)Isonzo Army Command, Quartermaster Section, Quartermaster No. 4493, January 31, 1918, as quoted in "Verpflegungslage der H. Gr. F. M. von Boroevic," p. 7.

\(^7\)Max von Hoen, Geschichte des ehemaligen Egerländer Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 73 (Vienna: Verlag für Militär- und Fachliteratur Amon Franz Göth, 1939), p. 561.
general deprivation, commanders were soon faced with the specter of impending collapse of discipline. Another morale problem arose from the fact that Hungarian units received their supplies directly from their homeland. Since Hungary was the breadbasket of the empire, and since its officials understandably discriminated in favor of their own men, Hungarian units often received much better rations than other units in the army. This led to dissension and nearly open battle between Hungarian units and the more unfortunate troops from other localities.\(^8\)

Other side effects occurred that could have been humorous had they not produced such tragic consequences. In some units the hunger was so great that the troops would beg their officers to be allowed to go on raiding parties behind Italian lines "merely to snatch some food from the Italians."\(^9\) Even the food that was available was often not distributed properly due to the lamentable transport conditions. In the mountain areas enemy positions often overlooked and interdicted the Austrian supply lines, preventing even food and water that was available from being brought forward to the front lines.\(^10\) A final blow to the soldiers was that the food that finally did arrive was often of poor quality, causing various ailments such as dysentery and jaundice.\(^11\) Ironically, these illnesses were classed

\(^8\)Ibid., pp. 561-63.


\(^10\)Bardoiff, Soldat im alten Österreich, p. 308.

\(^11\)Bergmann, Am Niemandslande, p. 350.
as minor and did not allow a man to be taken out of the lines and sent to the rear for recuperation.

A particular longing of the Austrian soldier was for the coffee that had been so much a part of civilian social life and which he never saw at this time. An officer reported seeing his men boiling badly roasted corn kernels in empty shrapnel shells in order to simulate their beloved coffee. Naturally, any break in the routine of shortages was appreciated and fondly remembered. The historian of the Deutschmeister regiment lovingly recorded the menu that the regiment was served on March 20, 1918, in celebration of the anniversary of the founding of the regiment. Breakfast was merely black coffee, but at noon the real feast began: soup, 10.5 ounces of beef per man, with potatoes and paradise sauce (a type of tomato sauce), corn semolina with marmalade, and black coffee. The meal was topped off with a half liter of wine. Then, for supper, the men received a gulyas, containing 7 ounces of horsemeat per man, potatoes, 4.2 ounces of fish, tea, and another half liter of wine. In those days of want it was a truly memorable event.

The effect of the food shortages on the morale of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers was not lost on the Italians. One of their propaganda leaflets played directly on this theme:

12 Karl Novotny, Die 29. I. D. in der Juni-Piaveschlacht 1918 (Reichenberg: Der Heimatsöhne im Weltkrieg, 1929), p. 15, n..

AUSTRIAN SOLDIERS!

The Daily portion of Austrian soldiers on the front as of March 12, 1918, is:

- Meat (generally horsemeat): 5.6 ounces
- Bread (nearly all corn): 14 ounces (half a loaf)
- Wine: 1 ounce in a week
- Terrible coffee: nearly half a serving spoon
- Rum: one spoonful every ten days

The daily portion of an Italian Soldier on the front as of March 12, 1918, is:

- Fresh beef: 12.25 ounces
- Macaroni or rice: 5.25 ounces
- White bread from wheat: a whole loaf of 26.25 ounces
- Potatoes or dried vegetables: 5.25 ounces
- Cheese: 1.75 ounces
- Greens
- Coffee: .7 ounces
- Sugar: 1.05 ounces
- Wine: 3.63 ounces

Mountain troops have in addition: cognac, mulled wine, double coffee rations, chocolate, and fresh fruit.

The portion of the Italian soldier is the same for all troops both in the front lines and in the hinterlands. The same is given to all Austrian soldiers in Italy. Sick, returned prisoners can tell you this. Compare and think well on your interests.\(^{14}\)

Elements of the Armeeoberkommando, of course, realized the problems that were being generated by the lack of food. It was not simply a matter of morale but also the fact that starving troops did not have the stamina to undertake a major battle. Plans were

\(^{14}\) Unnumbered leaflet, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 451, 1918 11th Army Command General Staff Division (Intelligence), Plugzettel I-III, Feinjespropaganda, Ital. Zeitungen. An Italian document captured by a storm troop quite closely confirms that these were accurate figures. Whether this largesse was consistently achieved is another matter, of course. See Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 445, 11th Army Command, 1918, Operations Division, Enemy Intelligence, and Intelligence Files, Nos. 601-837 from April 13 to May 31, Enemy Intelligence No. 731, May 12, 1918. Another favorite ploy of the Italian propaganda service was to stick loaves of bread on the ends of bayonets, poke them over the edge of their trench, and invite the Austrians to desert so they could eat.
developed to increase the food rations of the armies in Italy during the four weeks prior to the June offensive to a level equivalent to a normal ration, that is, about 24.5 ounces of bread per day plus meat and potatoes. This would completely deplete the army stores but it was hoped that the losses could be made up through captured Italian booty after the offensive was underway.  

Despite all of the efforts to increase the rations prior to the offensive, the long range goals were not met. Although rations were generally improved they were still insufficient by ordinary standards. Along various sections of the front conditions perhaps even deteriorated. Archduke Joseph reported that during a visit to the front near the end of May a deputation of soldiers approached him and begged him to improve their rations, since they were starving. Conditions at the front were so upsetting to Joseph that he dispatched a reproachful letter to Waldstätten, expressing complete indignation at the state of affairs. He wrote:

Before the offensive, I must absolutely have enough rations so that the troops will have the strength so as not to be weakened by exertions. This is no 'lamentation' but the absolute, unvarnished truth. I assure you that we can achieve a great victory if we enter into the battle fully and completely prepared. . . . It will not come to pass, however, with hungry, half-armed troops.

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15 Ameeoberkommando Operations No. 142.010, May 1918, as quoted in "Verpflegungsstelle der H. Gr. F. M. von Boroевич," pp. 31-32.


17 Sixth Army Command Operations No. 880/64, as quoted in "Verpflegungsstelle der H. Gr. F. M. von Boroевич," Appendix 1, p. 46.

18 Joseph to Waldstatt, May 29, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Hofzug Stücke.
Although the Archduke's feelings were understandable, there was little that could be done. The army could not give out food that it did not have. Field Marshal Boroević realized the futility of writing another letter to the Armeeoberkommando and adopted a different tack—he promised his men that they could have all the food they needed or could take from the Italians. The offensive could then be anticipated by some as a potential relief from hunger.

Many soldiers, however, could look on the oncoming battle with nothing but loathing or apprehension. Among the more disaffected men, possibly the most volatile were the prisoners of war returned from Russia. The signing of the peace of Brest Litovsk had released hundreds of thousands of Austrians from Russian prisoner of war camps, and since these men represented a reservoir of trained and generally fit men, the army was anxious to get as many of them as possible back into front line units as rapidly as possible. There were two major obstacles this goal. First, there was the question of the psychological state of men who had been in captivity for up to three years, and second, there was the difficulty presented by the fact that these men had spent the last part of their captivity in a land wracked by revolution and bolshevist and socialist agitation. Some of the Austrian prisoners of war may have been subjected to subversive propaganda or even won over to the communist cause.

But how to tap this reservoir of men without endangering the morale of the army or the internal fabric of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy by the inclusion of communist agitators was a puzzle that the

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Armeeoberkommando would have to solve rapidly.

An elaborate system was constructed to screen the returning prisoners of war and to separate the potential troublemakers. First, the men were sent into a quarantine camp for fourteen days. The purpose of this was ostensibly to treat the sick and wounded and to make certain that the men were carrying no contagious diseases. While these stations actually did perform their stated duties, they also functioned as observation centers where the men could be closely watched for signs of incipient bolshevism or unpatriotic ideas. All dangerous agitators or troublemakers were separated from the main group during the next stage of the processing. Those men who were considered still reliable (and these men formed the largest group by far) were then sent into army retraining centers, where they were brought up to date on the circumstances of the war, new military developments, and gradually reintroduced to army life and discipline. This indoctrination period was coupled with a training course in infantry tactics approximately four weeks long. Finally, the men were given two to four weeks leave at home and then ordered to report to units on the Italian front. These men were designated as "satisfactory" and after leaving the original quarantine they were treated as normal citizens.

A second group of men was designated as "doubtful"—men against whom there was no proof of misdeeds or subversive thought, but who

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had in some way aroused suspicion. Outwardly these men were treated in the same way as those in the "satisfactory" category, but they were watched carefully, and civilian authorities were instructed to observe them during their home leave.

The final group of men was termed "suspicious." The men in this category had either cooperated with the enemy or else had expressed definite bolshevist or unpatriotic sentiments; concrete proof of their actions existed.21 These men were separated out from the others immediately and remanded to appropriate authorities for trial or other disposition according to the severity of the charges that could be brought against them.

Of course, this method was not foolproof. An extreme shortage of qualified intelligence officers made the sifting and sorting process a rather hit-and-miss affair and was responsible for many of the problems that later developed.22 There is no question that a number of men of doubtful allegiance slipped through the process, either through deception on their part or because of inadequacies on the part of the interrogators. Some of these men were returned to units and immediately began to act as communist agitators.23 Far from relieving the problems of the Austro-Hungarian army, the co-option of returning prisoners of war merely replaced the difficult

21_Ibid., p. 174.
22_Ibid., pp. 186-87.
23_Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Alt-Österreichs, p. 15. See also Przybilovszki, "Die Rückführung der österreich-ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen," p. 157, which indicates that at least some of the problems were due to outright deception on the part of the men.
circumstances of lack of reserves and replacements with a more plaguing question of whether these gaps should be filled by men of doubtful loyalty.\textsuperscript{24}

Even men unaffected by bolshevist ideas could not be too enthusiastic about the prospects awaiting them when they returned to army life. An extraordinarily perceptive report was filed by an intelligence officer in Belgrade in June, 1918, which outlined the dilemmas faced by the returning prisoners of war. First, most of the men had assumed that with their imprisonment their personal war had ended; consequently, they were not prepared to face the prospect of returning to the front. Second, they all expected to be returned immediately to their homes. Instead, they were quarantined for two weeks, involved in a long train journey, and then sent to their reserve units. Instead of the expected long leave with their families, they were given a maximum of four weeks at home. Third, the return home was disillusioning for them. They remembered the homeland as they had known it in the prewar days and in the early days of the war, and the new scenes of hunger, war-weariness, and privation were profoundly disturbing. After all too short a leave they went back to their units. As the officer described them:

Here they stood in front of us, discontented about their fate and their immediate reassignment to the front, disillusioned about their short leave, the shortage of rations, and the scarcity of clothing, embittered about the seemingly imminent injustice that they must once again go into battle while others had still never had to go to the front.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} Novotny, Die 29. I. D. in der Juni-Piaveschlacht, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{25} Quoted in Przybilovszki, "Die Rückführung der österreichungarischen Kriegsgefangenen," pp. 318-19.
For these men, no amount of patriotic propaganda could restore them to the eager young soldiers of 1914. The only modern historian who has done much work on the returning Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war of 1918 concluded that Russian bolshevist propaganda actually had little effect on the men and that the revolutionary ideas that sprang up among them were merely an inevitable reaction to their circumstances.  

Hunger, war-weariness, and the unrest of the returned prisoners of war worked in combination to weaken the physical and intellectual defenses of even the most steadfast Austro-Hungarian soldier and opened him to the blandishments of propaganda, and both Italy and the monarchy carried out extensive propaganda campaigns during 1918. Italian propaganda directed against the monarchy primarily raised the question of food (see p. 169 ante for an example) and otherwise played to the problems and prejudices of the varied nationalities of Austria-Hungary.

One leaflet addressed to the "Romanian Soldiers" announced that "the offensive in France has miscarried and forty German divisions have been destroyed in the first six days... Austrian and Hungarian divisions will be sent to France to be annihilated for German interests." This particular emphasis on the subservience

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26\textit{Ibid.}, p. 231. A great deal of work remains to be done on this question, however, since no attempt has yet been made to follow through and make a study of these men once they had actually returned to their units. Such a study could clear up a great deal of uncertainty as to the role played by these returned prisoners of war in the final dissolution of the army.

27"Rumanische Soldaten!" Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 448, 11th Army Command, General Staff Division, Propaganda Reports, unnumbered leaflet.
of Austria-Hungary to German interests formed a recurring theme of Entente propaganda. Another leaflet addressed to several nationalities states that "Austria will become more and more subservient to Germany, and Prussianism will more and more gain the upper hand throughout middle Europe." Another leaflet addressed to "Hungarian Soldiers" asked "for who do you fight? Hungary? No! The Homeland? No! The Emperor William is now the master of Hungary!" The Italians engaged in a wholesale campaign to convince the various nationalities that they no longer had any real interests in the war but were only dying as pawns of imperial Germany.

Accompanying the theme of subservience to Germany was the recurring threat that this condition was only a prelude to the real German desire that Austro-Hungarian units be shipped to the Western Front. By now the Western Front had assumed the proportions of a nightmare to the soldiers in other theaters, and combat there was seen as the ultimate horror. It is interesting to note that the monarchy later countered by distributing propaganda leaflets to the Italians informing the troops that the Entente intended them to die in France.

Another recurring propaganda theme was the condition of life in the homeland and the future of the nationalities. Some of the leaflets were excellent examples to fuel the contention of the Armee-oberkommando that the homeland's newspapers were a fertile source of

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28 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 66, Army Group Command Conrad, Enemy Intelligence Group, Intelligence No. 400a/126, March 22, 1918.

29 "Ungarische Soldaten!" Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 448, ibid.
Italian propaganda. One leaflet read "Hungarian soldiers! Read your newspapers!" The leaflet then went on to quote from Pesti Naplo that over 800,000 Hungarian soldiers had died in the war and that nearly 24% of all children born in Hungary died in the first year of life due to the ravages and hardships of the war.\textsuperscript{30} Another leaflet directed to the South Slavs stated that their German and Hungarian rulers were trying to drive them asunder by pretending that Serbs and Croats were not the same people and by inventing a new nation of Mohammedans "to which they gave the name Bosnian."\textsuperscript{31}

A particularly insidious form of Italian propaganda attempted to spread disharmony among the soldiers by playing on nationalist fears and prejudices. In one instance of this type of propaganda, three letters were thrown into Austrian lines. One was addressed to a young ensign and purported to be from a fellow officer who had deserted to the Italians and who had known the young man from their classes together in officer training school. The other two letters were addressed to private soldiers and made the bald statement that they were to wait for a further message before deserting. The three addresses, all young Slavs, were, of course, subjected to intensive scrutiny and thorough questioning, during the course of which they denied any knowledge of why the letters were addressed to them and also that they harbored any unpatriotic intentions. Their stories were evidently believed by the investigating officer, who concluded that the men's names had probably been revealed to Italian

\textsuperscript{30}"Ungarische Soldaten! Leset ihr eure Zeitungen," \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{31}"Serben, Kroaten und Slovenen. Es ist bereits das vierte Jahr zu ende...," \textit{ibid.}
intelligence by a deserter from the regiment and that the Italians merely took advantage of this knowledge to sow dissension.\textsuperscript{32} Although the three men were found innocent, they could not help but be demoralized by the suspicion generated by the incident, and rumors of the original receipt of the letters probably contributed directly to German and Magyar distrust of the Slavic elements of the unit involved.

The reaction of the Austro-Hungarian army commanders to the various Italian propaganda ploys was at first one of puzzlement, followed by an attempt to counter it. The first response was typified in an 11th army report of March, 1918, which stated: "since Italy is not capable of defeating us on the field of honor, she is now attempting, under English leadership, to reach her goal of destroying our undefeated army through a well organized propaganda campaign of subversion, and especially through [inciting] a Slavic rebellion."\textsuperscript{33} As a result of this initial attitude, a hard line approach was instituted, proscribing the reading of enemy propaganda and threatening punishment to men caught doing so. This particular method of combating enemy propaganda was largely unsuccessful, and it was severely criticized by some lower echelon officers, who defended their men and pointed out that most soldiers recognized propaganda for what it was. As long as the men read it openly, they

\textsuperscript{32}Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 449, 11th Army Command, General Staff Division, Propaganda Reports, Propaganda No. 2242, May 28, 1918.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., Operations No. 1766, March 25, 1918.
pointed out, they did not desert. The only danger, the officers emphasized, was not from these men but from the secret readers who attempted to hide their activity.

A second and more reasonable attempt to counter Italian propaganda was by means of "patriotic instruction." This was similar and related to the instruction being given to returning prisoners of war. To promote positive ideas and thinking supporting patriotic ideals, carefully selected papers from the hinterland were distributed in all languages. Also a number of pamphlets attempting to justify the position of the Central Powers and denouncing the Entente Powers for espousing lofty ideals which they completely betrayed by their actions were written for, and distributed to, the troops.

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this counter-propaganda campaign, because there were so many real grievances among the soldiers; one cannot easily separate the real from the imagined complaints. As was pointed out in a report from the 1st division, there was fertile ground for despair: soldiers with twenty months of service and who had been wounded had never received even the bronze medal for bravery; many of the soldiers were starving; and most of the troops had not received any leave. As the report concluded,

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34 Storm Battalion 1 to Commander of the 1st Infantry Division, April 3, 1918, *ibid.*, Res. No. 40/Adj.

35 See Przybilovszki, "Die Rückführung der österreich-ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen," pp. 197-200, for a description of the methods and goals of this patriotic instruction.

36 Armeeoberkommando to 11th Army Command, March 7, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 448, 11th Army Command, General Staff Division Propaganda Reports, Operations No. 140.566. See also "PhSbus," Vaterländische Vortrage für Soldaten (Vienna: Kommissionsverlag Dr. Pimmer, 1918), which is a collection of these pamphlets.
"an undecorated, starving man, who does not get leave, will desert despite the most beautiful exhortations."  

These admonitions and others like them were at last taken to heart by the Armeeoberkommando, and steps were taken to improve morale before the impending offensive in June. One memorandum directed that as a part of the Army Group Conrad propaganda campaign (1) rations should be increased, (2) rations should be distributed more fairly, (3) more medals should be awarded to the enlisted men, and (4) since the men were very worried about the shortages being suffered by their dependents in the hinterland, they should be told that it was not only their right but their duty to gather up whatever booty they could during the offensive. Moreover, enlisted men should be allowed to send home an eleven to twenty-two pound package of food or other necessities. Armies and empires are in dire straits when looting becomes a duty, but there is no doubt that the men of the Austro-Hungarian army looked forward to the implementation of this order.

Counterpropaganda directed at the Italian army met with indifferent success. The problem was that since the Austrian propaganda office was not organized until November, 1917, the most opportune moment for an effective propaganda campaign, which was the immediate aftermath of the Caporetto offensive, was missed. Despite this

37 Storm Battalion 1 to Commander of the 1st Infantry Division, April 3, 1918, ibid., Fasc. 449, Res. No. 40/Adj.

38 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, unnumbered report, April 26, 1918.

39 Eleventh Army Command to Armeeoberkommando, July 9, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), ibid., Fasc. 449, 11th Army Pr. No. 2308, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 766/221.
late development of a propaganda program, the Austrian propaganda was relatively sophisticated in its simplicity. While many of the Italian propaganda tracts were sheets of white paper with relatively complex arguments written in bad German and Slavic, the Austrian leaflets tended toward garish colors and relatively simplistic approaches. Garish colored pages were used so that the scattered leaflets were more visible in the broken mountain terrain of the Italian front. The most prevalent examples of the Austrian theory of propaganda were the numerous photos and accounts of the recently concluded armistices with Russia and Romania. Smiling Austrian, German, Russian, and Romanian soldiers were shown enjoying the fruits of peace and fraternizing. The conclusions to be drawn were obvious.

The pre-offensive propaganda program outline for the June battles was quite detailed. Particular goals were to convince the Italians that the German offensive in France had not been completely shattered, to point out to them that the English and French wanted the Italians to be transferred to France to die on the Western Front, and to direct their attention to the worsening economic predicament of the Entente Powers. The Italians were also to be convinced that the Entente Powers were not really interested in their war aims, consequently, they should look to the example of Romania which, although defeated by the Central Powers, was granted the province of Bessarabia. Extensive use was to be made of planted information.

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40 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 448, 11th Army Command, General Staff Division, Propaganda Reports, Pr. No. 2013, January 31, 1918. This fascicle contains a number of examples of this approach, printed mostly on bright yellow, orange, and blue paper.
Some was to be buried in normal looking newspapers that were seemingly carelessly cast aside; other propaganda material was to be inserted in letters, diaries, and even facsimiles of Italian service books which were to be distributed so as to appear "lost" but put where Italian patrols would be likely to find them. Finally, the point was to be emphasized that the offensive was aimed not at gaining territory but at ending the war. After such elaborate preparations, it was a shame that the offensive miscarried to such an extent as to nullify the effects of the propaganda campaign.

There was one source of anti-Habsburg propaganda which also constituted a much more profound threat to the unity of the empire, and that was the existence of the so-called "legions," composed of Austro-Hungarian nationals who had chosen to serve with the Entente forces. Their very existence provided a possible locus for soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army who were disenchanted with the service or with the political situation in the empire. The only subjects of the empire who volunteered for these legions in a number sufficient to form distinct major units were the Bosians and Herzegovinans, who constituted a brigade on the Macedonian front, and the Czechs and Slovaks, who had formed a Czecho-Slovak legion in Russia and were now repeating the process on the Italian front. Although Villari states that a Romanian division was being formed in Italy, there is no other evidence that it actually existed.

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41 Ibid., Fasc. 449, Pr. No. 2218, May 12, 1918, Armeereibkommando Operations No. 766/120, May 10, 1918.
43 Ibid., p. 197.
A real moral dilemma was posed to the members of these legions. In the first place, these men were not always certain whether their loyalty should be directed to the Austro-Hungarian army, to which they had given their oath, or the representatives of the Czecho-Slovak council, who told them that their real duty was to fight for the future Czecho-Slovak state. The Czecho-Slovak council, which provided the focus for the formation of the Czecho-Slovak legion in Italy, was funded primarily in the United States and led by expatriates from the empire. Its members circulated through the prison camps in Italy recruiting for their cause. A sufficient number of Czechs joined enthusiastically, and a smaller number of Slovaks somewhat less willingly (there were reports of some rather coercive aspects of this recruitment, particularly Czech intimidation of Slovaks) to enable the Italians to form a division of troops staffed with Italian officers in all of the senior positions but using Czechs and Slovaks for most of the junior and non-commissioned officer slots.44

Although the Czecho-Slovak division later entered the lines and participated in a few minor actions against former compatriots, the true value of this unit lay in its propaganda functions. The very fact that such a body of men existed was a constant reminder to the subject races of the empire that they were not independent; fervent nationalists could take the presence of the legion as a symbol of the future. Meanwhile, an individual unhappy with his lot could consider and justify deserting to join such a legion. During the spring and summer of 1918 the legion's primary task was to form

and lead propaganda patrols into Austrian lines to encourage sedi-
tion and desertion among the Czechs and Slovaks in particular, and
Slavic troops in general, from the Austro-Hungarian army. 45

Army commanders constantly worried about the problems posed
by the presence of a legion on the Italian front but there is some
question as to how effectively it really fulfilled its role. It
participated in no major battles and even its propaganda patrols
were not as effective as the Entente Powers may have hoped. Al-
though the legion gained a few converts, the majority of the sol-
diers in the Austro-Hungarian army, including the Slavic elements,
considered the legionnaires as traitors, and even if they agreed
with the long range goals of the legion, most soldiers were not
ready to commit outright treason. As a matter of fact, the large
scale desertion problem that the Austro-Hungarian army sometimes
had faced on the Russian front was never a difficulty on the Ital-
ian front. The mass of the evidence indicates that the Slavic sol-
diers on the Italian front fought just as bravely and loyally as
the German and Magyar troops. 46 As the author of a study on the
organization of the Austro-Hungarian army has pointed out, the

45Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, pp. 6-7; Crociani,
"The Czechoslovak Corps on the Italian Front," pp. 6-9. See also
"Our Chance to fan the Fires of Revolt in Austria," The Literary Di-
gest, Vol. LVII, No. 13 (June 29, 1918), p. 15. A new article has
appeared on the formation of the legion by Johann Ranier, "Die Anfänge
des tschechoslowakischen Heeres in Italien 1917-1919," in Heinrich
Fichtenau and Erich Zöllner (eds.), Beiträge zur neueren Geschichte

46Hecht, "Fragen zur Heeresergänzung," p. 317. See also
Hermanny-Miksch, Durchbruch bei Flitsch im Oktober 1917, p. 8; and
Czechoslovakian reserves called up for duty could not have been too disloyal, or of questionable quality, because "one does not hear of any decrease in regimental strengths" such as would have occurred if sufficient qualified replacements were not available. 47

However, facts did not stop the army leadership from seeing a bogeyman behind every newspaper line. Attempts were made to confiscate all Czech newspapers bound for the front, and the Armeereibkommando was requested to institute stricter censorship procedures, all in vain. The Armeereibkommando pointed out that it was impossible to control the flow of newspapers to the front or to censor every newspaper in the hinterland. Its only suggestion for coping with the problem was to tell the officers to remind their men that "honor forbade desertion to the enemy." 48

The status of the legionnaires in military law was also a questionable point. Many of them had been captured early in the war. At that time Austrian military doctrine held that it was a man’s own fault if he were captured unwounded by the enemy. 49 Some


48 Entry for April 13, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Eleventh Army Command Diary, Vol. VIII, p. 2,945. An indication that desertion was not a great problem appears in Army Group Command Conrad’s report of May 6, 1918. Although this army group contained nearly half of the Austrian troops in Italy, it only reported the desertion of one officer, three non-commissioned officers, and eight men during the two week period ending April 27, 1918—less than one man per day. Army Group Command Conrad to Armeereibkommando, May 6, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 60, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeereibkommando Intelligence No. 9141/I, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence No. 20350/8.

of the men captured during the great Russian battles might have felt that they had nothing further to lose in the eyes of the Austro-Hungarian authorities and considered the legion to be a satisfactory alternative to prison camp, since it would provide them with amenities that were otherwise unavailable. In order to arrive at a suitable solution to the question of legionnaires who fell into Austrian hands, the army finally had to divide them into two categories. Those men who were only marginally committed to the legion were urged to desert at the first opportunity and return to Austro-Hungarian lines. A propaganda leaflet urged: "He who returns of his own free will has nothing to fear! Come with trust; your fatherland, your wife, and your children call you!"  

Those who voluntarily fought against their homeland, however, and who were captured in battle were to be treated as the basest of traitors and were to be summarily tried and executed at the lowest command level (normally divisional courts). As will be seen later, both of these policies were carried out.  

Still, there could be no question that morale within the Austro-Hungarian army was slipping badly. The returning prisoners of war were injecting both bolshevist ideas and defeatism into an already war weary army. Italian propaganda and the presence of former compatriots in the legions of the Entente Powers merely emphasized the disintegrative effect the war was having on the empire. The French

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50 "Czechen und Slovaken," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 448, 11th Army Command, General Staff Division, Propaganda Reports, unnumbered leaflet.  

51 Army Group Command Conrad to 11th Army Command, May 6, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 449, 11th Army Command, General Staff Division, Propaganda Reports, Pr. No. 2217, May 12, 1918.
army had survived its great mutinies of 1917, and it now appeared that the Austro-Hungarian army might face the same test. In fact, mutinies did occur, but in spite of the bad reputation that the Austro-Hungarian army has been given by historians who have concentrated on nationalistic splintering within the army and empire, these challenges to authority were in no way so extensive as those faced by the French High Command.

On the lower end of the scale of disorders there were merely outbreaks of indiscipline among troops moving towards the front. A typical instance of this type of problem was the incident of the march company of the 25th infantry regiment that shot up the countryside, towns, and various and sundry passersby from its train doors as it was transported south. The extreme upper end of the scale was exhibited by a reserve battalion of the 71st infantry regiment which revolted in May. The mutiny was suppressed only with the aid of machine gun and artillery fire from loyal units.

In between these two extremes were several instances of bolshevist organizing and propagandizing and a few, more serious instances of units temporarily refusing to obey orders and otherwise defying their officers. In most cases, however, the incidents

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53 Piala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 15.

54 Eleventh Army Command to Armeeoberkommando, April 10, 1918, and Armeeoberkommando to Eleventh Army Command, March 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Pass. 448, Eleventh Army Command Intelligence Reports, Pr. No. 2094. There were numerous rumors of bolshevist agitators, but army command was seldom able to verify the actual existence of one.
were relatively trivial and were quickly smoothed over. Their occurrence, however, boded ill for the army and the empire if the war were to continue much longer; they were an indication that the bonds of army discipline were at last beginning to erode among all of the nationalities. 55

Oddly enough, it appears that the primary impetus towards dissolution was provided by the army itself when it instituted the patriotic education programs. A Czech officer, commenting after the war, stated that the Austro-Hungarian army was a "surprisingly good one" as long as the various subject nationalities were treated like "robots" and never permitted to think beyond the boundaries of military life. Once, however, patriotic instruction began, the soldiers began to think as individuals. This caused them to question all aspects of the war and the empire and their place in both, and the slow transition from "Austro-Hungarian soldier" to Czech, Romanian, etc. began. 56 Once patriotic education forced the soldier to think about the war, he more often than not went on to ask "Who and what am I?" Once this question had been raised, he could no longer whole-heartedly accept the demands of unthinking obedience. This is not to say that the army's patriotic education program was to blame for the subsequent dissolution of the army, since Entente propaganda and nationalist forces were actively pursuing the same goal at the same time.


time. The problem was that its introduction at this time in the course of the war was merely a matter of bad timing, emphasizing the defects in the system.

It was evident from the beginning of 1918 that the army had to reverse the trend towards disintegration and the decline in morale, and the most obvious course of action for the Armeeoberkommando to follow was to inspire the soldiers both mentally and physically for the hardships of the upcoming offensive. The answer to the problem was to correct the conditions and remove the sources of complaint to the greatest extent possible. The first steps in this direction were the previously mentioned increase in rations and the unfortunately two-edged sword of patriotic education. The next steps undertaken were more mundane but went far to relieve the problems.

One of the major changes was the removal of one of the greatest irritations in the life of the front-line soldier—the discrimination that he often faced while in the rear areas. As in most armies, rear echelon troops had taken over the facilities for rest and recreation behind the lines and then set about determinedly to maintain them as a private domain. Every possible bureaucratic obstacle was used to preserve this ascendancy. Finally, an order was issued by the 11th army forbidding the continuation of such practices and ordering all officers in rear areas to be personally responsible for facilitating the rest and recreation of soldiers on leave from the front. The seriousness of this order was emphasized by the punishment of two officers who had obstructed the quartering of newly arrived troops for trivial bureaucratic reasons. While this was not a panacea, the army order did provide some measure of relief and the
punishment of the two officers at least provided a modicum of satisfaction and revenge to the wronged men.  

Another attempt to bolster the performance of Austro-Hungarian troops was the introduction of bonus payments for outstanding performance of duty. For instance, a patrol from a Hungarian division that captured and brought in a French prisoner was given a fifty kronen reward. A regular bonus program was also instituted for the destruction of enemy airplanes. Anti-aircraft gunners who shot down an enemy plane were to be given 500 kronen to be split among the gun crew, while pilots who shot down an enemy plane were to be paid a bonus ranging from 500 to 1,000 kronen. If a pilot was able to force an enemy plane down intact behind friendly lines, he was to receive a bonus that could go as high as 3,000 kronen.

Along more traditional lines, a training course was begun to prepare soldiers for the tactics and conditions of the upcoming offensive. The training plan was quite thorough, with up to two-thirds of the infantry in each division expected to complete six to eight weeks of training, stressing movement, river-crossing techniques, attacks on prepared positions, close combat techniques, and combat tactics in Italian viticulture. The hope was to increase the competency of the majority of the Austro-Hungarian infantry units so

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57 Entry for April 9, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), 11th Army Command Diary, Vol. VIII, p. 2,937.

58 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 445, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence, Enemy Intelligence No. 722, May 10, 1918.

59 Ibid., Enemy Intelligence No. 720, May 10, 1918. The pilots got a much larger bonus than the gunners, but considering the quality of Austrian aircraft, they probably deserved every kronen.
that they would be approximately equivalent to storm troops in the
tactics of infiltration. 60

Like most army training plans, the actuality of the Armeeober-
kommando's scheme did not match its theory. The overall training
time was drastically cut so that the troops could be used to provide
labor for the offensive preparations. Another aspect stressed in
many of the after-action reports was that the exercises which were
carried out had little credibility. In order to keep Austrian in-
tentions as secret as possible the training courses did not show the
men real Italian defensive positions, so the Austro-Hungarian troops
were still unclear as to what they would find in the enemy lines.
In a second attempt to keep secrecy paramount, the number of officers
aware of the plans was restricted; this led to a shortage of training
courses for the junior officers—a truly ridiculous expedient. 61

A report criticized the training courses by asserting that
when soldiers go through a new training course they expect reality

60 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, "Files Without Numbers,"
Isonzo Army Command Operations No. 2400/1, April 12, 1918. An exact
translation of "italienische Kultur" is difficult. The Armeeoberkom-
mmando and army officers used the term as a shorthand description of
the particular type of horticulture peculiar to this region of Italy.
In particular, it refers to the extensive vineyards, the thick bushes,
and the high riverbanks normal in northern Italy. These features
presented a difficult military obstacle in that once troops penetrated
into these areas the attack became very fragmented as observation was
impaired and individual squads became separated by the thick vine-
yards, making a continuous front impossible to maintain during an ad-

61 "Sonstige Wahrnehmungen, Erfahrungen und Wünsche der Truppen,"  
Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/  
III, pp. 5-7, (521-35).
to live up to the predictions of the course. The Austro-Hungarian infantrymen were told in their training that their artillery would flatten most of the enemy positions and the capabilities of the new gases were reported in enthusiastic terms. However, such effective artillery preparations were impossible and Austria-Hungary did not possess any of the new gases. This dichotomy between theory and reality could produce nothing but mistrust on the part of the soldiers. They had to believe either that they were lied to by their instructors or that the high command was also completely duped in planning for the offensive. 62 Neither of these beliefs was compatible with trust in the leadership of the army. The confidence of the men could also not be bolstered by the major live ammunition practice that was held in early June. A number of casualties occurred when nearly a fourth of the mortar shells failed to explode on contact but went off at their first disturbance by infantrymen. 63

After all of these factors have been studied, gauged, and mulled over, the question of the real state of the Austro-Hungarian army in June, 1918, is still largely unanswered because the testimony is so varied. A British officer serving in Italy at this time described the Austro-Hungarian troops as "more animal than human," but this was probably nothing more than a typical propaganda quote. 64


63 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 53.

64 Hoffnung-Goldsmid, Diary of a Liaison Officer in Italy, p. 125. The author of this book was incredibly biased.
More sober judgements were also mixed. One captured British officer observed that the support troops of the 74th Honvéd division and the 28th division were "inferior and unused to shell fire," while another British officer, captured at the same time, reported that the troops he saw were relatively well clothed and "in good physical condition." A British infantryman was impressed by the "fine physique and deportment" of some captured Austro-Hungarian prisoners.

Austro-Hungarian testimony on this subject is also varied. General Novottny, the commander of a brigade of infantry in the 29th division, emphasized the fact that the men in his division were severely undernourished and were not physically prepared for the exertions required of them. He also stated that the "famous, manly soldier spirit of old and the desire of the brave front troops to do their duty remained undisturbed, and in spite of all hardship, privations, and temptations, the imperial and royal army went into battle with wonderfully worthy elan." Novottny's opinion is seconded by Brigadier General Pengov, an artillery commander during

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65 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 198.

66 Ibid., pp. 197-98.

67 Norman Gladden, Across the Piave (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1971), pp. 129-30. It is this type of contradiction that makes judging difficult. The officers and the infantrymen were in the same section of the line and were facing the same troops, but their experience led them to these highly differing conclusions. On the other hand, a British officer believed that some of the Austro-Hungarian troops had been drinking. This would of course have led to contradictory behavior. Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 198.

68 Novottny, Die 29. I. D. in der Juni-Piaveschlacht, p. 18. See pp. 30-31 for a further description of the physical condition of the men.
the June Battles, who stated that the troops were not physically able to carry out an offensive but "their morale was good" and they were "willing still."  

Fritz Weber, the author of a number of short books which the Austrians consider the "Volksbücher" of the Austro-Hungarian army in Italy, has written that the men had reached the conclusion that this battle was not to be a decisive one, that at best they would push the Italians back a few miles, then the trenches would be re-dug and the whole game would resume again. Weber's overall impression was that the "powerful will to victory that ruled us all in the victory of the Twelfth Isonzo has departed." In a phrase, the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak; the Austro-Hungarian army would go into the June battle with hope, but not with enthusiasm, with vigor, but not with strength, and with a will to win, but not with the belief that victory would achieve peace.

Each man and each unit awaited the battle in their own way. Some did so with fear and some with quiet, but many followed the example of a Jäger unit which threw a wild party on the night of June 9. The best of the remaining food was consumed and the night passed with skits and musical presentations as the men and officers alike donned costumes, skirts, and an air of gaiety, doffing their dignity to present a night of satire and cabaret, mocking the army and life itself. 

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69 Pengov, Wahrheit über die Piaveschlacht, pp. 11, 10, and 44.


71 Ibid., p. 10.

72 Bergmann, Am Niemandslande, pp. 367-68.
Another extreme portent of the impending battle was the increase in desertion. As before any battle, a trickle of men began crossing the front lines to seek presumed safety in an enemy prisoner of war camp. They took with them the plans of attack, so far as it was not already compromised, giving the Italians the last confirmation of the offensive and its timing. This latter information was all-important as it allowed the Italians to clear the bulk of their troops out of the front line trenches so that they would not be exposed to the full fury of the Austro-Hungarian artillery preparation. This time the Italians were not going to repeat their mistake at Caporetto; they were going to put their faith in the deserters' tales.

For the soldiers this treachery put the last nail into the coffin of their despair. With the attack due to begin on the morning of the 15th, the units had moved into their final positions during the two preceding nights. Their presence was now revealed to the Italians and the consequences were reaped. On the Asiago Plateau the Austro-Hungarian soldiers had to endure a day of heavy artillery fire on the 14th as Italian guns swept the Austrian rear areas with heavy fire from dawn to dusk, inflicting heavy casualties before the

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73 As early as May 12 two officers had deserted in the 11th army sector. As one of them was the regimental intelligence officer, it is probable that he was able to give the Italians a thorough briefing on Austrian plans for the battle, if not the exact timing. Entry for May 13, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), 11th Army Command Diary, Vol. VIII, p. 2990.

units could even enter battle. 75 Another unit attempting its approach march during the night of the 15th was subjected to heavy casualties; it reported twenty dead, and three officers and ninety men wounded in one battalion, and all telephone lines cut by Italian artillery fire. The battalion commander stated later that "it did not have the appearance that we were the attackers." 76 For better or for worse, however, the die was cast, and the infantrymen would have to go out on the morning of the 15th and attempt to salvage the failures of their higher leadership. It was not to be a happy attempt.


CHAPTER VI

THE MIDSUMMERNIGHT'S DREAM

June 15, 1918, was not, of course, the opening day of the June Battles. The opening shots had been fired in the Tonale Pass during the morning darkness of June 13, and judging from the general course of the battle they probably missed. "Lawine" had originally been scheduled to begin on June 12, but during the night of the 11th an untimely storm began, producing rain at lower altitudes and snow above 6,500 feet. As a result, the Austrian artillery, which had begun its preparation, could not observe the fall of its fire. It was decided that blind firing could have no useful effect, and the

1 One of the most difficult decisions to make concerning the narration of the June Battles was how detailed to make the description of the actual battle. The participating countries in the war have published official histories which give good, detailed accounts of the battle at the small unit level; it would be somewhat counter-productive to duplicate their efforts. Such detail would also tend to obscure the main thrust of this study. On the other hand, sweeping generalizations or a discussion of the battle at the corps and army level would provide an insufficient base of information since the course of the June Battles is not particularly well known in this country. The result of these considerations is that most segments of the battle will be described at a divisional level. It is hoped that such a compromise decision will give a sufficiently detailed overview of the course of the battle to satisfy all but the cognoscenti who can satiate their desire for tactical detail in the official histories or the various specialized studies noted in this chapter. I have also decided to treat "Lawine," "Radetzky," and "Albrecht" (further subdividing the latter into the Piave and Montello segments) as separate battles since, in actual fact, each proceeded independently. Completely diversionary attacks such as the one in the Astico sector have been eliminated from the account entirely.
entire offensive was postponed until the weather improved.\footnote{Bericht über die Lawineaktion," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1714, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 38/H, p. 2 (67).}

During the day of June 12 the weather began to clear, and although conditions were still not ideal, it was decided to proceed with the attack. The operation began at 0430 on June 13, 1918, with a brief and wholly inadequate artillery barrage. Shortly thereafter, the infantrymen left their trenches and by 0730 they had captured the Italian first line positions in the saddle of the pass. This achievement was no great feat, since the Italians, in accordance with their tactical doctrine, had left the first trench only lightly defended; the trick was to hold on to the position once it had been captured. In order to retain what the infantry had gained on the floor of the pass, the Austrian troops attacking the heights on both flanks of the valley also had to accomplish their mission. The strong Italian mountain emplacements there had not been damaged by the light artillery preparation, and the troops defending them put up a fierce resistance. New snow storms compounded the Austrians' difficulties, causing numerous units to lose their bearings in the lowered visibility. The attack on the mountain flanks began to collapse and lose cohesion before it really got started. By 1500 the Italian artillery was inflicting severe losses on the Austrian 1st brigade in the enemy trenches across the valley floor, and small groups of men began to lose heart and retreat. As night fell, the Austrians were back in their starting positions, having accomplished absolutely nothing in their attack. At 0915 on the 14th, the
Austrian commander decided to cancel plans for continuing the assault on the ground that such a course of action was impractical under the circumstances. 3

An Armeekommando officer observing the Tonale operation reported seven reasons for the failure to make any progress in the attack on the pass. First, the Austrians believed that it was absolutely impossible to achieve surprise, since a buildup of forces on the monarchy's side of the Tonale Pass could not be concealed from Italian observers. The second reason was a factor endemic to much of the Austrian planning for the entire June offensive. In spite of believing that surprise was impossible, the Austrians, in a mistaken effort to keep the exact schwertpunkt a secret, decided to forego any extensive surveillance of the enemy lines. Therefore, the Austrians were not cognizant of some major changes in the Italian dispositions; this meant that the already meager artillery preparation largely fell on empty frontline trenches. The fact that not a single prisoner of war was taken in the infantry attack is indicative of the lack of intelligence information by the Austro-Hungarian command. The third complaint concerned the artillery preparation. The reporting officer felt that there were far too few artillery pieces either to suppress the Italian artillery or to damage the infantry's emplacements. The weakness in artillery was further compounded by the fact that so few guns had gas shells that gas became a negligible factor in the battle and merely served to pinpoint the exact locations of the attack. Fourth, the artillery communications

with the advancing infantry were totally inadequate, leading to an absence of artillery support after the first line had been captured. Fifth, the officer merely noted the extremely bad weather and the problems caused by the heavy snowfall. Sixth, the 220 mm mortars, which were expected to be of great help in the offensive and to at least partially offset the lack of adequate artillery, were completely ineffective. The seventh, and possibly most damning failure from the overall viewpoint of command responsibility, was the quality of the units chosen to conduct the assault. The 22nd Schützen division was not really trained in the type of mountain warfare that was necessary in the Tonale Pass, and though it did a competent job, its actions were hesitant and its advance timid, largely due to the units' unfamiliarity with the conditions of fighting in the high mountains. The 1st division, although a good unit, was also untrained, unprepared, and unequipped for mountain warfare. In addition, the division had spent the two days prior to the attack in rain and snow storms without shelter or warm clothing. The men were therefore physically weakened before the offensive began and psychologically unable to cope with some of the specific conditions and dangers of mountain warfare. 

All in all, the Tonale Pass action was a complete flop. Its effect was so minimal that the Italians did not bother to transfer any men to the area. The real failure cannot be ascribed to the commanders or troops making the assault but rather to the Armeoberkommando. Considering the terrain and the strength of the Italian

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4 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1714, pp. 4-6 (88-89).
defenses, the number of troops and guns assigned to the sector by the Armeeoberkommando was wholly inadequate. What was even more appalling was that the Armeeoberkommando, with some of the best mountain troops in the world under its command, should use the mountain divisions on other parts of the front and then employ two untrained divisions for the only high mountain warfare in the offensive plan. This shortcoming in the Armeeoberkommando's planning was not too dangerous in the attack in the Tonale Pass, which was supposed to be merely a diversionary operation anyway, but other defects in its overall strategy were now to become apparent on the other fronts.

In the Seven Communities the terrain and the Entente defenses placed a number of constraints on the Austrian attack plans. On the westernmost flank, in the XIV Edelweiß corps sector, the terrain was mountainous and wooded. The Italians had decided to depend on the natural strength of the land for defensive purposes and had not developed the man-made defenses so formidable as they had done in other parts of the front. There were few prepared positions and the primary artificial obstacle was a ten foot wide, barbed wire entanglement across the length of the front. Unfortunately, the Austrians had not planned on making a major offensive effort in this sector, and they were thus not prepared to take advantage of the Italians' unprepared state.

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5 XIV Corps Command to 10th Army Command, June 3, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, XIV Corps Operations No. 951/Feind (10th Army Operations No. 4559/18fd., June 5, 1918) in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 25950/28, June 5, 1918.
In the area of the main attack, on the Asiago Plateau, the defenses were on another order of magnitude. The opportunities for attack were severely limited by natural and man-made barriers. First, on the extreme left of the British line was a precipitous natural gorge called the Ghelpac. This area was defended by an Italian division that only had to insure that small parties of Austrians did not try to infiltrate across it; a major attack there was impossible. The main line of defense held by the British corps consisted of a narrow zig-zagged trench, sometimes blasted out of solid rock. Although strong and nearly impervious to shellfire, the construction of the trench was not particularly suited to British defensive tactics. In front of the British lines was a series of wire entanglements that were to prove a horrible shock to the Austrians. The wire was composed of strands nearly twice the normal thickness, and the monarchy's wirecutters proved completely unable to sever the wire. The approaches to the British defenses were very limited and tended to channel an attacker into prepared lines of advance. The commander of the British 48th division noted this last factor and several times prior to the battle conducted defensive

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7 Edmonds and Davies, *Military Operations, Italy*, p. 169. The British had developed a defensive doctrine based on holding a staggered series of strongpoints. The trenches which they took over from the Italians were adapted to a strictly linear defense and had no special strongpoints.

8 "Erfahrungen der letzten Kampf," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757, Operations No. 43b/Sz, p. 5 (801).
training exercises designed to take advantage of these terrain features. The practice proved immensely helpful. During the actual attack on the 15th the Austrians were repulsed by a British counter-attack which exactly followed the lessons learned. 9

Of equal importance to the British defenders was the fact that their lines were backed by an excellent network of roads which were masked from Austrian artillery observers by folds of ground and wooded areas. These hidden access routes provided an easy method for the quick transfer of reserves to threatened portions of the line. 10 This hindrance to observation was a decisive factor in the coming battle because the Austrian artillery, which had no good cover for its own guns, was only able to spot British gun positions by means of air observation. 11

The eastern portion of the mountain front consisted of extremely formidable Italian defense lines in the Brenta Valley and on the Grappa Massif. Trenches had been blasted out of rock to a depth of seven or eight feet, and machine gun emplacements had been prepared and exactly sited to cover all possible approaches. 12 The mountainous nature of the front posed an insurmountable problem for the

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9 Barnett, The 48th Division in Italy, p. 64.

10 Ibid., p. 59. See also Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 169; and Dalton, With the British Guns in Italy, pp. 182-83.

11 Dalton, With the British Guns in Italy, p. 184. See also Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 200.

Austrian artillerymen. Their guns could only be sited and supplied on the eastern slopes of the Hochfläche, west of the Brenta, and on Mt. Pressolan. This positioning allowed the Austrian artillery to bombard the enemy front lines, but the Italian reserve positions and support troops were either in dead spots or out of range. This meant that the Austrian infantry would have no artillery support after penetrating the front lines. ¹³ The immense advantage given to the defenders by the terrain, augmented by well-placed trenches and barbed wire entanglements, presented a far from enticing prospect to the Austrians attacking the Grappa Massif.

Entente batteries preempted the Austrian guns and fired the opening rounds of the June Battle on the mountain front. Warned by deserters, the Italians knew of the Austro-Hungarian concentration taking place in the darkness of June 14th and attempted to break it up by harassing fire. ¹⁴ This tactic was highly effective, causing heavy casualties in some Austrian units before they even reached the front lines. It was not a propitious beginning for the battle.

For reasons which have not been explained, the Austrian barrage differed widely from the pre-planned schedule. The original orders for the 11th army artillery commanders had called for the preparatory barrage to begin at midnight with three hours of counter-battery fire. At 0300 the artillery was to switch to specific infantry targets, alternating gas shell with high explosive and shrapnel until 0530, at which time the Austrian infantry would go over the

¹³ Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 49.
top and approach the Entente positions. Whether the change in plans was due to the incomplete nature of the preparations for the offensive or to the general shortage of ammunition is an open question; at any rate, the Austro-Hungarian artillery preparation did not actually begin until 0300.

Although the Austrian batteries were supposedly massed for the offensive, they did not really have an overwhelming superiority of numbers over the Entente guns facing them. The combined English-French-Italian artillery in the Seven Communities amounted to 1,314 guns (616 light, 651 medium, and 47 heavy) as opposed to the Austrian count of 1,589 guns (1,220 light, 341 medium, and 28 heavy). In fact, the Entente forces had superior numbers of medium and heavy artillery pieces, allowing them to outrange the imperial guns. Reflecting this lack of a decisive edge in firepower, the Austrian artillery preparation met with mixed success. On the one hand, the guns hit and blew up a large British ammunition dump behind the English 48th division and largely destroyed the communications wires behind the entire British front. Its main goal, however, the suppression of the Entente artillery, eluded success. The formidable, allied firepower rapidly responded to the Austrian fire, and as the day wore on made life intolerable for the Austrian gunners who were outranged and unable to hide from British observation.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\)"Artilleriebefehl für Radetzky," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1704, 11th Army Command Operations No. 22.555/Art.*, May 19, 1918, pp. 2-5 (9-12).

\(^{16}\)Edmonds and Davies, \textit{Military Operations}, Italy, pp. 199-200.
Part of the Austrian problem was caused by exact enemy knowledge of the monarchy's intentions, gleaned from deserters, but an even greater factor was the complete failure of the gas attack to inflict damage. Various reports confirmed its ineffectiveness. The I and XXVI corps reported finding only four enemy dead and thirty-six ill from the action of the gas shells. Reports from some British officers who were captured by the Austrians merely confirmed that the gas attack had utterly failed. Since much of the success of the offensive depended on an effective and crippling gas attack, this was a major blow to the army's planners and leaders.

Several other facts illustrated the ineffective nature of the artillery preparation on the Asiago front. At first some British observers were deluded into believing that the artillery fire was a mere demonstration rather than a serious prelude to the offensive. Their conclusion was that the barrage was "unregistered" and "not a success." The Austrians had hoped that their liberal supply of

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17 Eleventh Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad, June 20, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 952, D. N. O. No. 653 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 29150/27. See also 11th Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad, ibid., 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 938, D. N. O. No. 643, in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 28950/32; and Barnett, The 48th Division in Italy, pp. 66-67.


19 Eleventh Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad, June 20, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 952, D. N. O. No. 653, Army Group Command Conrad No. 29150/27.

20 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 199.
mortars would do something to alleviate their general artillery shortage, but they were disabused of this notion by some captured prisoners of war who had considered the mortar fire as so insignificant as to not be worthy of mention. However, as an example of how widely subjective judgement can vary, a British infantryman on the receiving end of the barrage described it as "hell... as bad as Ypres." He described himself and his fellow soldiers as having cowered in the solid rock emplacements which were slowly filling up with the debris of near misses.

About 0700 the artillery fire began to diminish and the first waves of Austrian infantry entered the British defenses. Using infiltration methods in the wooded zones, they soon forced several gaps in the British line. At this time it was the British impression that the Austrians were showing considerable tactical initiative and were making excellent use of the woods, fog, and sheer weight of numbers to carry out their advance. This combination of factors allowed the Austrians to break through the first line positions and advance approximately 700 yards, almost to the switch trenches. Although of all the units in the Asiago sector the 48th

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24. Barnett, With the 48th Division in Italy, pp. 74-75. See also Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 205.
British division was the best prepared to meet the attack, its line was broken in four different places, several gun positions were overrun, and some consternation was expressed by its officers about the situation. The Italian division on the left of the 48th division offered to extend its own lines for another 800 yards to cover the entire extent of the Ghelpac—a gesture greatly appreciated by the hard-pressed British since it allowed them to free sufficient troops to form a counterattack force.  

By noon, however, the British still believed that they were in a somewhat precarious position, with only "scattered parties" impeding the Austrian advance. They were quite surprised, then, when Austrian pressure slackened and then disappeared.  

As is so often the case in a battle, each side was aware only of its own plight and ignorant of its enemy's. While the British were concerned about the seemingly overwhelming numbers of the Austrian attackers and their own weakening defenses, the Austrians were beset with their own worries. At the same time when the British infantrymen were complaining that their own artillery was remaining inactive and leaving them unsupported, the Austrian infantrymen believed that the same British artillery had in actuality "shattered" their attack before they could close with the Entente's defenses.  

British artillery spotters held the observation advantage and were

25 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, pp. 207-09. See also Barnett, With the 48th Division in Italy, pp. 79-80.

26 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 209.

27 Gladden, Across the Piave, pp. 120-23. See also "Bericht einer Division," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna); Armeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. 2 (365).
able to see exactly where the Austrian reserves were moving. This made it easier to ensure that their own artillery and reserves were in the proper place at the proper time to blunt each attack as it developed.28

For the Austrian infantrymen, the situation was becoming serious. They had broken through several parts of the line, but their casualties had been heavy, and their ammunition stocks were diminishing rapidly. In the Ghelpac area casualties were stripped of their ammunition, and Austrian machine guns were reduced to firing only in short bursts.29 The firefight slackened, and general confusion enveloped the advanced Austrian parties. The woods and broken terrain were splitting and slowing the advance, but the Austrians were on the verge of success when one of those accidents occurred which can shatter any attack. A regimental commander in the 38th Honvéd division, believing that he was not making sufficient progress and that the casualties in his unit were becoming too heavy, ordered his men to begin falling back toward their own lines. The Austro-Hungarian regiments on both of his flanks, who had received no orders of any kind since leaving their own trenches early in the morning, and who now saw the Honvéd regiment begin to retreat, decided to follow its example. After all, the Hungarians might know something that they did not. It was the type of situation in which

28 Barnett, With the 48th Division in Italy, p. 75.

no one is really to blame for the consequences. The Honvéd commander should not have begun to retreat on his own initiative, but the divisional commander was not keeping so close touch with the battle situation as he should have. The real disaster was that other units followed the regiment's example; it was an indication of the breakdown in Austrian morale that had been occurring. The result was predictably catastrophic. An infantry regiment that had already broken through the British 23rd division's front turned around and began retreating, as did the Austrian regiments that had broken the extreme left of the 48th division front.\footnote{"Berichte Hptm. v. Mosing u. v. Huber," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1782, p. G32.} This sudden easing of pressure allowed both British divisions to regroup without serious interference and to prepare their counterattacks.

This pause was all that was necessary, and by 1600 the first British counterattack was launched. Although a relatively determined Austrian defensive effort prevented it from achieving any great success, the British attack did allow them to reestablish a continuous and solid front. Partially due to the Austrians' lack of training, their casualties mounted rapidly as the afternoon wore on into evening. English commentators observed that the Austrian troops appeared to be brave and tough fighters, but that they were completely unschooled in the proper employment of terrain and cover to reduce losses.\footnote{Ibid.} With the loss rate in their favor, the British slowly overcame their original deficiency in numbers and their superior training began to assert itself. The two divisions spent
the night of the 15th-16th in making further preparations, and at 0445 on the morning of the 16th resumed the advance. By 0730 their old line had been restored and patrols had penetrated into no-man’s land and even entered the Austrian trenches in some places before the monarchy’s soldiers had managed to reorganize their defenses. 32

On the 23rd division front, the British situation was never quite as serious as that which had faced the 48th division. True, the Austro-Hungarian units were not lacking in elan. In the 38th Honvéd division a regiment, led by the regimental commander and the regimental priest, holding high a crucifix, marched off toward the British lines singing Magyar battle songs. The attack began to break down quickly, however, when the advancing units ran into the English wire entanglements with their immensely thick strands. From that point forward things began to go wrong. It is obvious that the Hungarians did not abandon their attack easily; at the end of the day the 21st Honvéd infantry regiment, for example, had lost forty-six officers and 856 men—68% of the unit’s officers and 66% of its enlisted personnel. 33

The Austro-Hungarian infantry was not able to capture such broad sections of front nor penetrate so deeply into the 23rd division’s lines. Although some of the British units suffered up to 20% casualties, the few Austrian successes were quickly stymied and the penetrations sealed off and eliminated. By 1400 the last Austrians

32 Barnett, With the 48th Division in Italy, pp. 82-84.

were driven from their position or taken prisoner. The British commander hoped to follow up the defensive victory his divisions had scored with a local counteroffensive which would attempt to drive the Austrians back beyond their original lines. He was joined in his request for permission to do this by the French corps commander, but Díaz refused to countenance it, arguing that the situation was still too fluid on the Piave front, and that the reserves in hand were inadequate to achieve any success.

From the Austrian point of view, the 15th had been a bad day for the armies on the Asiago Plateau. The fighting had begun well, but English counter-battery fire had wreaked havoc among the guns supporting the Austro-Hungarian infantry, and the infantrymen who had reached the English lines had been dismayed to find much of the wire entanglement intact. Still, the attack had been pressed forward, and until noon the situation still had appeared favorable. This impression had finally been dispelled when the mistaken retreat began in the early afternoon. Considering the limitations placed on their supplies, artillery, and men, the Austrians had never really had much hope for decisive success on the plateau. Despite this, they had come close to achieving some sort of minor victory, only to be robbed of it by fate (fate, thy name is Magyar). It was a victory that would not have lasted more than a day perhaps, but it

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34 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, pp. 202-04.
would have provided a great boost to the morale of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers attacking on the other fronts.

To the east of the British front the 16th division and the 42nd Honvéd division carried out an attack on the French corps, but this was even less successful than the attacks on the British. Units of the 52nd regiment penetrated the first line, but they were driven back before they could reach the second French position. Units of the 25th and 26th Honvéd regiments managed to overrun the forward French strongpoint on Hill 1094 and then penetrated the first trench-line, but they, too, failed to make sufficient headway to carry the second line by coup de main. The cost in casualties of these endeavors was high. 37

Further to the east, the Austro-Hungarian VI corps had a much more successful day than its neighbors. Its attack, spearheaded by units of the 18th division and the Edelweiß division, struck the Italian XIII corps, which promptly began to collapse. The assault on the Costalunga redoubt, at the juncture of the French corps and the XIII corps, began well when the Italian infantry holding the position fled, abandoning the French artillery observers who were sharing the observation point. 38 The Jäger units and the Deutschmeister regiment of the 18th division continued past the first

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37 Ibid., p. 244.

38 Eleventh Army Intelligence Group to Army Group Command Conrad, June 19, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence No. 932, D. No. 0. No. 643, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 28950/32. This particular interview is also of interest in that it reveals a deep antipathy between the French soldiers fighting in Italy and their Italian "comrades."
Italian trenches and for brief periods penetrated several sectors of the second defensive line, but they paid a heavy toll for their efforts. The breach driven into the Italian line by the VI corps was approximately 3.2 miles in width and 1.6 miles in depth at its greatest penetration. The Italian Supreme Command was so worried by this threat that it began withdrawing many of the large caliber guns from the XIII corps rear area.\(^\text{39}\) The VI corps held this bulge in the Italian defenses until the night of June 18, 1918. When the units were withdrawn, their casualties told the story of their determination. The 22nd Field Jäger battalion was reduced to a total strength of eighteen infantrymen and two machine guns.\(^\text{40}\) The 104th regiment had only 204 riflemen left—-one for every six paces of front they were defending.\(^\text{41}\)

The easternmost unit of the VI corps, the 26th Schützen division, which was scheduled to defend the corps' Brenta flank, also took heavy losses. Despite continuous Italian counterfire with artillery on the 15th, which had destroyed all telephone lines with the rear and caused numerous casualties among the infantrymen, the division had taken and held the first Italian trench as well as some switch trenches further to the rear. When the Austrians reached the second main line of defense in the village of Sasso in the Col

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\(^\text{41}\) Hoen, *Die Deutschmeister*, pp. 800-03. See also Edmonds and Davies, *Military Operations, Italy*, p. 201.
d' Ecchele, their attack sputtered. After a minor breakthrough, the Italians were able to repulse the Austro-Hungarian troops and reestablish a cohesive front. The 26th Schützen division could go no further.\footnote{Ernst Wihaupt, Die 52. Landwehr-Infanteriebrigade (Landwehr-Infanterieregimenter 9 und 10) im Weltkrieg 1914-1918 (Reichenberg: Der Heimat Söhne im Weltkrieg, 1928), pp. 439-40.}

Conrad's dream was shattered. The Asiago Plateau, on which he had centered his hopes and gambled his career and reputation, was now the scene of total failure. The successes of the VI corps could not redeem the fact that the main attack had foundered on the first day and could show no ground taken. The army and army group reserves, placed to reenforce the Asiago sector, could not be diverted in sufficient strength to support the VI corps' breakthrough. The expenditure of munitions on the first day of the offensive, which left ammunition stocks at a dangerously low level, coupled with the ineffective efforts of the artillery, precluded any further attack on the plateau.\footnote{Regele, Conrad, p. 401.} The only remaining hope for a success by Conrad's army group had to be placed on the divisions attacking between the Brenta and the Piave.

As could be expected, the attempt to breach the Italian defenses on the Grappa Massif was also a long-term failure. The basic problem was the same old story of supplies and reserves. The complete lack of water in the vicinity of the front lines and the transportation difficulties presented by the terrain had made it a work of dedication merely to keep the normal number of front line troops
supplied. Because of this, the reserves for the battle were held
far behind the front since the local commanders agreed that to send
any more men forward would merely compound an already intolerable
situation. 44

In the Austro-Hungarian XXVI corps, the 27th division was able,
through heroic effort, to break through the Italian 1st, 2nd, and
3rd lines of defense, with scattered parties moving as deep into the
Italian lines as Col Moschin and Col del Fagheron. Some storm units
actually reached the flanks of Mt. Raniero. The entire route was
still under enemy artillery fire, primarily from Italian cavern guns
on Mt. Grappa, and the reserves, far to the rear, were unable to
move forward rapidly enough. As a result, the most forward posi-
tions were quickly lost to counterattacks and only a relatively
shallow penetration of approximately a mile could be retained. 45

In the 32nd division sector, the story of the 27th division
was repeated. In addition to the other difficulties, the troops
nearing the front were under constant observation from Italian air-
craft, which, in turn, meant that the Italian artillery was con-
stantly interdicting the constricted approach routes. The Austrian

44"Bemerkung des A. K. zum Bericht des Obstlt. Brendl," Kriegs-
archiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. 3
(414). The Armeeoberkommando had been warned about the problems of
an offensive and its supply in this region, but, despite all of the
doubts expressed by local commanders, Waldstätten was convinced of
the suitability of the area. Schilhawky's appreciation of the sit-
uation somewhat glossed over the supply difficulties.

45Kissling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen
Front," p. 44. See also Arz, Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 270;
course, a gain of one mile on the Western Front was often considered
a great victory.
infantryman's bitterness towards his own air force and artillery blossomed and intensified as he believed that he was having to endure this shelling because of their cowardice or ineffectiveness. Still, there was cause to hope for some success when elements of the 86th regiment penetrated nearly a mile into Italian lines. A young officer in the regiment noted happily, "the attack speeds forward." As the officer's battalion began the attack on Mt. Rivon, the last peak in front of Mt. Grappa, he began, however, to realize some of the handicaps the Austrians were laboring under. "Fire preparation?--we did not know that our artillery suffered from a munitions shortage and had to restrict itself to a short bombardment. On the first day of the the attack! In front of the enemy main line!" By mid-afternoon, his company had suffered over forty wounded, and by late afternoon the end was in sight. The Hungarian battalion leading the attack was pinned down under enemy fire, out of ammunition, and unable to acquire resupply or be reenforced. The Hungarians reported repulsing one attack with stones.

Meanwhile, on the flank of the XXVI corps the I corps was facing similar problems. The commander of one of the divisions noted that the Italian prisoners of war taken by his unit had judged

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the Austrian artillery preparation as having had "little noteworthy effect."\textsuperscript{50} Despite the artillery deficiencies, various infantry units of the corps managed to occupy portions of the Italian front trenches. In no case, however, did they reach the second trenches, and in the long run they were unable to hold the gains that they had made. The telephone report to 11th army headquarters on the evening of the 15th told the story of the offensive effort between the Brenta and the Piave:

"50th infantry division has been pushed further back."

"55th infantry division can go no further."

"20th infantry division's attack on Mt. Tome has failed."

"48th infantry division has remained in the rear."

The 11th army diary concluded: "If it is in the interest of the whole, we will return to the attack tomorrow. It will, however, only be a lot of useless shooting. . . . From XV corps command, the question: 'Shall we carry out a hopeless attack in the morning or not do anything further?'\textsuperscript{51}

There was no desire at any level of command to continue what had become a useless exercise on the mountain front. All further attacks were canceled, and the decision was made to conduct a defensive action in the most advanced positions that could be held. From the Entente's point of view, the situation in the Austrian ranks now appeared to be serious. Lord Cavan, the commander of the

\textsuperscript{50} Bardoiff, \textit{Soldat im alten Österreich}, pp. 318-19.

\textsuperscript{51} Entries for June 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), 11th Army Command Diary, Vol. VIII, p. 3046.
British corps, reported that his divisional commanders were reporting a "state of collapse" in the Austro-Hungarian army. Despite his desire to turn to his advantage the disorganization engendered within the Austrian ranks by the repulse of their attack, Cavan's suggestion for an immediate counteroffensive was vetoed by the Italian Supreme Command with the explanation that no reserves for such an offensive were available. 52

Nonetheless, the British and French were able to carry out a few limited counter actions in which they were joined by a few Italian units (primarily artillery). The deep salient carved out by the VI corps was the most exposed and dangerous portion of the Austrian line, and it was subjected to the greatest pressure. Despite a continuing heavy rain, which obscured vision, Italian guns kept up a heavy barrage on the men defending the salient, and the Edelweiß division had to repulse repeated counterattacks. The 52nd brigade was among the hardest hit units of the VI corps. When it was withdrawn from the line after the battle, its strength had been reduced from 3,500 men to only 1,200. 53 In the Asalone sector, the same features of terrain that had hindered the buildup of forces and supplies now increased the suffering of units in the exposed bulge. Especially unfortunate was the situation of the wounded. In the XXVI corps sector, an officer reported a field behind the line filled with hundreds of casualties for whom little could be done.


"The doctors are frustrated. For one casualty, it takes four carriers an entire day to evacuate him." 54

The 27th and 32nd infantry divisions were also faced with the same deadly circumstances as the Edelweiß division. They were exposed in a salient, cut off from their own lines by artillery fire, unable to advance, unable to be relieved. Their success of the first day, which had allowed them to take nearly 6,000 Italian prisoners, now betrayed them. Their determination to victory had left them out on a limb, and the continuous bombardment now destroyed them as fighting units. 55

Typical of another kind of the tribulation now faced by the Austrian units on the mountain front was the experience of the 36th infantry division. The unit had been designated as the VI corps reserve and had not taken part in the initial assault. Nevertheless, by June 19, 1918, the division had lost 4,690 men, nearly one-half of its total strength, from enemy artillery harassing fire alone. One reason for this high casualty rate was the fact that the division had been ordered to turn in its steel helmets when it left Bessarabia and the men had never been issued new ones. Major General Nöhring, the commander of the division, dispatched a letter to the Armeeoberkommando, expressing a bitterness that in normal circumstances would have gotten him relieved of command or at least an official rebuke. 56

54 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 66.

55 Ibid.

Despite its losses, the 11th army had to keep up some sort of pressure on the Italians. As long as the situation on the Piave remained undecided, Conrad’s armies had to keep up artillery fire and storm troop actions whenever possible to give at least the appearance of offensive action and distract the Italians from what had become the decisive scene of the conflict. 57

The 11th army had not failed entirely in its offensive endeavors. Despite the lack of ground gained, the army had taken 12,993 prisoners of war, indicating either relatively successful attacks or lowered Italian morale. 58 The problem was that the army’s attack had not met expectations. On the Western Front the ground that had been gained would have been considered a major success; many famous battles had gained less at a greater cost in casualties. Total casualties on the two sides were not disproportionate. Why the dejection among the Austrians then? Simply put, such great hopes were held for the battle that anything less than another Caporetto would be a disappointment. Also, the Austrians knew that this was their

57 Entry for June 20, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), 11th Army Command Diary, Army Group Command Conrad Operations No. 25.000/80; Vol. VIII, p. 3,626. See also 11th Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad, June 20, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, 11th Army Command Operations No., 171/40 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 28950/26. The latter communication also warned the army group commander that fully prepared counterattacks had to be reckoned with in the near future. The 11th army had become aware that the Entente forces had been preparing an offensive in May and had only postponed it. They feared that it would come now, and this is exactly what the British and French were urging.

58 Eleventh Army Command to Army Group Command Conrad, June 25, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence No. 1014 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 29950/9.
last throw, their last Waffentanz on the Piave. It was an all or nothing situation, and since the attack was not an overwhelming success, it was a good as a complete failure. Nirvana was not to be found in the mountains of the Tirol, and the only other place to look was on the Piave.

Though the shooting would continue for a few more days, the offensive on the mountain front was effectively at an end. The infantrymen had gone into battle on the morning of the 15th with hope and confidence in achieving at least a limited success. By the night of the 15th these dreams were ended. Many explanations were given for the failure, but that is another story. The question at this time was what to do next? With the Tirolean operations completely shattered, the only hope left was that the armies on the Piave would be successful. The situation on that river held the potential for victory, and there was optimism that the men released from the battle on the mountain front could be used to exploit the hitherto limited success of Boroevic's army group.

59 See Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/III (Jansa Report), p. 2 (521), which states: "the troops went into battle with an elan... not seen since the beginning of the war." See also Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757 (Szikall Report), Operations No. 43b/Sz, p. 3 (799): "I accompanied the 22nd Honved infantry regiment on a nightmarch... and not once in peacetime have I seen a unit in greater order or better spirit. They sang for the entire length of the march." Another report, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1809, Operations No. 2604/5, p. 4 (527), agreed "our infantry has gone into battle with the greatest offensive spirit." It is possible that these reports were trying to put the best face possible on the matter. Considering the complaints by the soldiers to their own commanders about conditions, it seems strange that the Armeeoberkommando officers would find them quite this cheerful.

60 Kiszling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen Front," pp. 37-38.
On the Piave, the situation confronting the Austro-Hungarian army differed in several important respects from that on the mountain front. The first and most formidable obstacle that the assaulting troops had to face was the river itself. Although the specific measurements varied from one point to another, the generalization can be made that the river was approximately 300 yards wide and sixteen to twenty-three feet deep.\(^61\) This observation was valid only in the best of times because rainstorms could change the picture with unbelievable rapidity. Major General Goiginger described the river on the 17th of June, for instance, as "a wild, rising torrent, from 1,000 to 2,200 feet broad."\(^62\) Conditions in June of 1918 forced the Austrians to consider the normally placid Piave River as their first enemy.

Once the Austrians managed to get across the river, it appeared that their task would be easier than that faced by Conrad's men in the mountains, because here the Italians did not have the same, obviously strong, natural defenses that the mountains provided. On the Piave they had to provide man-made fortifications in greater numbers to improve on nature, and it is questionable how successful they were in doing this. According to the British official history of the war in Italy, the Italian Piave defenses consisted of a large number of lines that were not, however, sufficiently developed in depth.\(^63\) This view seems to be disputed by General Hussey, of the

\(^{61}\)This varied, of course, over the thirty mile stretch of the river which the Austrians would have to cross.

\(^{62}\)Goiginger, "Die Piaveforcierung," p. 15.

\(^{63}\)Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 222.
British 5th division, who described the Piave positions in January, 1918, as consisting of a system of backlines, with "lines upon lines of wire-entanglement, both parallel and at right angles to the river."64

The Italians were in the process of constructing a defensive system of the type that is termed "elastic." Although some authors, particularly Italian ones, have referred to this as a completely new system of defense, such was hardly the case; in reality, it was the same system that the Germans had begun employing in 1917 on the Western Front and which the Entente Powers had quickly adopted.65

The system began with a line of outposts on the river banks, immediately past which were dug one or two trenches, protected by heavy barbed wire entanglements. The trenches contained a complete dug-out system and were constructed so that each trench was connected to others by a good network of communications trenches. Past this forward line was the "deep zone." This zone was a couple of miles deep. It consisted of small machine gun positions hidden in underbrush, strong single house groups or "objects" covered by interlocking zones of fire from emplaced machine guns, and finally, "large strongpoints" containing machine guns, flame throwers, mortars, and bunkers for up to company-sized units. These latter


65 Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, p. 117. Dr. Fiala agrees with Mario Caracciolo, Italian im Weltkrieg (Rome: Edizioni Roma, 1936), in treating this defensive theory as "completely original." In fact, an Armeeoberkommando study of the defenses after the battle concluded that the defenses were "[arranged] exactly in accordance with our 'Principles for Defensive Battles.'" See Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1739, pp. (479-80).
strongpoints were to be used as rallying points and starting positions for counterattacks.  

DIAGRAM 1

Typical Italian Strongpoint Near Castadel

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67 Ibid., Appendix 1, p. (484).
The final obstacle to be faced by the attackers was simply the problem presented by the Italian viticulture, and it was this feature that made the terrain along the Piave fully as difficult an obstacle as the mountains. The viticulture not only hindered the advance but was suited for the placement of hidden machine gun nests. It also caused a continuous difficulty in maintaining communications with flank units, leading to a psychological hesitancy to move forward. The battle among the vineyards became an interconnected series of hand-to-hand battles, demanding a copious supply of hand grenades. Unfortunately, this was another of the weapons which Austria-Hungary

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Ibid..
did not possess in large numbers. The tactics involved in this type of fighting required well-trained non-commissioned officers and competently prepared soldiers; there was a long-standing lack of the first, and the manner of preparations for the offensive precluded the second. In one sense, the closest analogue to this type of fighting was the battle in the Normandy bocage during 1944. In both instances the defender had all of the advantages of terrain bestowed by a fragmented battlefield and the attacker had to pay heavily in lives for short and slow advances.

As was the case in the mountain offensives, secrecy was not maintained before the Piave battle. The fact that the Austrians waited until shortly before the beginning of the offensive to construct bridges over the arms of the Piave to Papadopoli Island gave the plan of attack away. Such construction should have been carried out during the winter, or slowly throughout the spring, so that the work would appear merely an improvement of communications. The sudden appearance of these bridges in May and June, at a time when the empire was known to be preparing an offensive, made it obvious that an increase in traffic was expected—and the only explanation could be an attack originating from Papadopoli Island. DeserTERS also played their part in betraying plans to the Italians. It is always difficult to gauge the effect of such betrayal, but there is one indication that the Italians placed great reliance on the

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69 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, p. 4 (865).

70 Kiszling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen Front," p. 41. See also the comments on pp. 17-18 concerning the near psychosis of the 23rd brigade about the security of its flanks.

71 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1776, p. (190).
information they received: every "main" attack across the Piave was met by well-prepared and ready defenses, while the secondary, demonstration attacks had the greatest success.\textsuperscript{72}

The artillery preparations on the Piave followed a course similar to the schedule employed on the mountain front:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0300-0410</td>
<td>Surprise fire on the enemy batteries with gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0410-0525</td>
<td>Destructive fire on forward enemy positions and men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0525-0555</td>
<td>Gas bombardment of known enemy concentrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0555-0635</td>
<td>Gas bombardment of attack zones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0635-0655</td>
<td>Annihilating fire on infantry positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0655-</td>
<td>Infantry to begin river crossing.\textsuperscript{73}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The artillery placed along the Piave was not to achieve much success during the battle—a failing behind which lay many defects in both equipment and employment. The most demoralizing aspect was perhaps the defects revealed in the munitions. There are few things more disheartening, not to mention dangerous, to the artilleryman than prematurely exploding shells. Already by 0430 on the 15th, after only one-half hour of fire, an artillery group commander was killed and one of his aides severely wounded by one of their own defective shells.\textsuperscript{74} Two guns operated by one young artilleryman exploded on him during the first three days of the battle.\textsuperscript{75}

From many infantrymen came complaints about the lack of artillery fire in support of the infantry attack. An infantry unit complained that, whereas in an attack in Russia in 1917 the regiment

\textsuperscript{72}Novotny, Die 29. I. D. in der Juni-Piaveschlacht, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{73}Kisuling, "Die Durchbrucheschlachten an der italienischen Front," (Puchalski Gefechtsbericht), p. 2.
\textsuperscript{74}Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{75}Biedermann, Vom Isonzo zur Piave, pp. 192-93.
had been supported by 160 trench mortars, fewer than thirty were assigned to it for its assault across the Piave, and these few were short of shells. More dismaying was the lack of heavy guns. An infantry officer's wry comment was, "this concert has no bass section."\(^{76}\) A more bitter observation came from another officer who complained that "the conservation of munitions at the cost of the infantryman's blood is reprehensible and was the primary reason for every failure of the world war."\(^{77}\) This was, of course, the infantry's viewpoint. While the complaints were justified, the fault did not lie with the artillerymen but with an industry that could not produce sufficient and effective shells (there were also charges of sabotage), and army staffs that could not get the munitions that were produced to the front lines when they were needed. The failure was also not on the part of the infantry though they were the ones who paid for most of the mistakes.

Compounding the problems caused by the shortage of munitions and their defects was the impossibility of conducting adequate observation. At no place along the Piave was there a stretch of high ground adequate for artillery observers. The lack would have to be made up with aerial efforts, but Austro-Hungarian pilots were not able to gain air superiority during the first day of the offensive or subsequently. As a result, the artillery was forced to fire blindly, which was not only wasteful of the army's meager resources

\(^{76}\) Armeeberkommando Secret Operations No. 1776, p. (190).

\(^{77}\) Ibid., p. (191). This comment is reminiscent of Krauß' comments after the Caporetto offensive.
but also largely ineffective. 78

There were also numerous complaints about the lack of Austrian air activity and its predictable result of highly effective Italian artillery fire. The 10th and 12th divisions reported that as early as 0615 their rear areas were being hit by heavy ship's guns firing from the southwest and that by 1100 the Italians had hoisted five observation balloons, unmolested. 79 An infantry regimental report indicated that a 240 mm mortar battery in its vicinity had been completely destroyed by Italian artillery fire after only one-half hour of firing. 80 Other units were reporting that the Italians were expending great amounts of artillery ammunition and that their fliers allowed them to achieve an "unholy precision" in their bombardment of the advancing Austrian infantry. 81 An artillery brigade commander reported that, as of the first daylight, "enemy air squadrons and single fliers flew over our front" and that "numerous opposing observation balloons floated in the sky." This unlimited Italian observation resulted in tremendous casualties in his unit from artillery fire. 82

There were several reasons why the Austrians were unable to

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79 Kiszling, "Die Durchbruchschlachten an der italienischen Front," pp. 4-5.

80 Terényi, "Bericht über die Kampfe des I. R. 27," n. p. Someone has crossed out this information in the manuscript, but it does not appear to be the same handwriting as Terényi's changes.


82 Fengov, Wahrheit über die Piaveschlacht, p. 45.
gain air superiority. First, the Austrian air force was completely outnumbered by the Entente air units. Second, the Austrian pilots were simply no match for the Entente pilots on a one-to-one basis, even when pitted against "routine English pilots." The most telling factor, however, was the inexperience of the Austrian pilots. One of the Austrian squadrons, for example, contained only ten pilots, and of these, eight had never flown a combat mission. Third, the Austrians flew inferior aircraft. One of the main problems with their fighter aircraft was that they were normally armed with the "01" machine gun, which was likely to freeze at altitudes above

83 The entire question of air strength is illustrative of some of the frustrating aspects of working with Italian-derived figures. All Italian and Entente sources appear to agree that the Entente Powers had 676 aircraft on the Italian front, facing 580 Austrian planes. See Villari, War on the Italian Front, p. 200; McStee, Italy's War, p. 98; and Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Weltkrieg 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 17, Historisches Abteilung-Generalstabs des [Italian] Heeres, "1918-19. . . Zum Jahrestag der Schlachten am Piave und von Vittorio Veneto," pp. 11-12. Austrian sources tend to place the Entente air strength at 524 planes versus 280 Austrian aircraft. See Bardolf, Soldat im Alten Österreich, p. 317; Regele, Gericht über Habsburges Wehrmacht. Letzte Siege und Untergang unter dem Armee-Oberkommando Kaiser Karls I.-Generaloberst Arz von Straussenburg (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1968), p. 93.; and Regele, Conrad, p. 401. Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, p. 228, agrees with the other Austrian figures but has a qualification. On p. 221 it quotes an Italian source (Baj-Macario, Giugno 1918, p. 68) that the Entente had 390 Italian aircraft, plus 76 British and 20 French planes (486 total) actually stationed in northern Italy. The Austrian figure is probably correct for their own aircraft, that is 280 operational planes. The Italians consistently overestimated Austrian strength, both during the war and in present histories because they seemingly arrived at their figures by multiplying the number of organizational units times the table of organization strength. Since the Austrians were seldom able to maintain the numbers called for by tables of organization, Italian estimates are normally incorrect by a factor of two. In this particular case, it can be estimated that the Austrians were outnumbered in the air, possibly on the order of two to one. This counting problem should be kept in mind in discussions of land strengths also.

13,000 feet. Since much of the air combat on the Italian front took place over mountains, the Austrians were put at a considerable disadvantage.

With air observation at a minimum and with few vantage points on the north bank of the Piave for ground observation, the Austrian gunners were entirely dependent on communications with the advancing infantry for artillery fire direction. Even this unsatisfactory alternative did not work out properly, because the Austrians rapidly discovered many faults inherent in their ground communications system. At the root of the problem was a shortage of modern communication equipment. There was so little material and so few trained personnel who could operate and repair the baulky devices that were available that a smooth functioning of the signals system could not be expected. In fact, it was not until the end of August that each front line division could expect to have its own company of telephone personnel. In June those signal units that actually existed faced further troubles in attempting to fulfill their functions. The wires strung across the river seemed to malfunction more often than not. Those that did not become water-soaked were quickly cut by enemy artillery fire; this, in turn, caused heavy casualties among the few trained personnel who had to be sent out to repair the breaks. Radio communications were also intermittent; the only radio station that was set up in the VII corps area was shelled

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85 Ibid.
every time it stuck its aerial up. 87

Faced with the failure of modern communications, the forward
infantry reverted to older methods of signaling, but these also had
disadvantages. Very pistols sometimes worked, but usually they could
not be seen far enough away; signal rockets were more visible, but
there were so few colors available and the meaning of the colors was
so seldom changed that the Italians were very successful in "sending"
false messages to the Austrian rear positions. One report on the
communications problem concluded that the only effective means of
communication during the advance was to use carrier pigeons (of
which there were too few) and human runners (who were slow and suf-
fered a high casualty rate). 88

Illustrating the importance of these problems is the litany of
woe emanating from the 9th cavalry brigade when it summed up its ex-
periences in the June Battle. On June 15 the brigade reported that
the artillery was "firing short" and "did not respond" to the green
signal rocket that was fired to signal this effect to them. The
next day they reported that "artillery communications failed again."
On June 17 nothing had improved; a scheduled infantry assault was be-
gun without the requested artillery support but "casualties occurred
due to shorts." Things were even worse on the 18th. The Italians
launched a counter attack and the Austrian reserves were "delayed
due to shelling by our own artillery." The brigade's comment on the

87 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, pp. 15-17 (871-
72). See also Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/II, p. 4,
(569).

88 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, pp. 15-17
(871-72).
19th was nearly resigned as it again reported "shelled again by own artillery." Finally, on June 20 an artillery communications officer came across the river and cooperation with the guns began to improve. This experience does not seem to have been confined to the one unit, and it illustrates some of the problems caused for the attacking infantry by the lack of liaison with its own rear areas. It goes a long way towards explaining the breakdown of morale among the infantrymen, their loss of faith in their fliers and gunners, and their ultimate lack of success.

Despite the frustrations stemming from artillery and communications snafus, the infantry attack began rather successfully. Footbridges were constructed across the river through Herculean efforts on the part of the engineer units, but these were quickly destroyed by enemy aircraft and artillery fire. Those bridges that escaped destruction by the human enemy were soon swept away by raging waters. Initial resistance was minimal, however, as the forewarned Italians had abandoned the front line trenches and taken up secondary positions. Occasional strongpoints had been left to impede the Austrian advance and give warning of the actual appearance of the infantry, but the main body of Italian soldiers had been saved from the destructive efforts of the preliminary bombardment.

The XXIII corps, which was to make a demonstration assault at S. Dona di Piave, got a pleasant surprise. The Italians had evidently placed considerable faith in the information given them by

89 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1739/I, pp. 3-5 (489-90).

90 Trevelyan, Scenes from Italy's War, p. 214.
deserters concerning the area of the main attack because the 61st infantry division, defending the area, was not prepared for more than a perfunctory effort. The corps was also aided by the fact that the commander appears to have expended great effort, training his engineers and preparing his corps for the task ahead of it.\footnote{Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, p. 9 (868).} The Austrian 10th infantry division took advantage of the Italians' surprise and on the first day made the Isonzo army's greatest advances, tearing a breach three miles wide in the Italian defenses and penetrating two and one-half miles south of the Piave.\footnote{Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 225.} Since the corps' attack was intended only as a demonstration, no reserves were available for rapid commitment, and the ability of the Italians to react to Austrian thrusts with great rapidity nullified the possibility of any long term success.

The attack by the VII corps was not only expected by the Italians, but it was also not so well prepared as the offensive in the XXIII corps zone. The assault was carried out with great elan by individual units, however, and by the end of the day the 9th cavalry division and 24th infantry division had taken the first four Italian lines. At this point, the attack bogged down because no reserves had come forward and both the VII corps and its neighboring XXIII corps had become overextended. The area that they had captured was too large to be held by the few infantry units that were available to the two corps.\footnote{Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1739/II, pp. 1-2 (502-03).}
This is not to say that the advance had been easy. Here, as in the mountains, the Austrians discovered that their gas shells were largely ineffective. One group of Austrian soldiers got caught in their own gas without masks and reported that it acted only as an "eye irritant." Also, there was no question but that the Italians had improved both their morale and training since the previous fall; their defense was spirited and their counterattacks were carried out bravely.

The viticulture south of the Piave made it possible to conceal numerous machine gun nests and every passable way was defended by the large, concrete strongpoints which were impervious to rifle and machine gun fire. Those units fortunate enough to have small mortars or infantry guns with them were able to reduce these pillboxes; those without such weapons could only take them with heavy losses. Separated from their neighboring units by the undergrowth, small parties of men continued to advance without knowing if they were being supported or if they really had secure flanks. Thus uncertainty produced indecisiveness and sometimes panic, especially when the parties were ambushed or attacked by armored cars. Still, the advance went forward with more success than the situation warranted. By evening, the "diversionary action" of the VII and XXIII corps was at an end. The troops had advanced deep into enemy lines and, in

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94 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1776, p. (190).
95 Bergmann, Am Niemandslande, p. 371.
96 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1739/II, pp. 3-4 (504-05).
97 Ibid.
spite of counterattacks, held bridgeheads sufficient for further exploitation. These units, however, had shot their bolt, and the chances of further success depended on whether they received enough reenforcement.

About the main attack from Papadopoli Island, the less said, the better. The attackers took very heavy casualties, and only a few units even managed to cross the river. Those that did cross found themselves out on a limb. The river, enemy artillery, and British aircraft smashed their bridges behind them, and Italian counterattacks from fresh, barely bloodied troops inflicted severe punishment on them. By nightfall there was no coherent bridgehead and the surviving troops had to struggle back to their own side of the river, suffering terrible casualties in the effort.98 With this crossing eliminated, the operations previously designated as secondary now became the focus of Austrian attention. Due to the reason and manner in which the secondary crossing sites had been acquired, they were weakly held and difficult to reenforce quickly, leaving them highly vulnerable to concerted Italian attempts to eliminate them. It was fortunate for the Austro-Hungarian infantry holding on to their precarious foothold that the Italians did not consider immediately trying to dislodge them.99

June 16 was a wasted day for the Austrians. The initial troop dispositions had been predicated on a specific attack plan which now had to be scrapped. Reserve units now had to march long distances

99 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 225.
to reach the sectors in which there had been successful attacks, and the time spent in this effort precluded any massive reenforcements from crossing the river on the 16th. The situation was made even more uncomfortable by the fact that Boroević had become unaccountably silent and issued no orders, leaving all decisions to his two army commanders. 100

New rains began swelling the already torrential Piave, and the difficulties in keeping bridges over the river in operation were multiplying. Enemy air activity destroyed those bridges that the river missed. The experience of the day demonstrated to the Austrians another flaw in their original planning. They had strung their flak out over a long length of front, leaving only a few guns to defend any particular bridge. The fallacy of these tactics was shown by the success of one commander who deployed seven batteries of anti-aircraft guns to defend one major bridge. The results were remarkable, with fourteen enemy planes shot down or making forced landings while the bridge remained intact. 101

Unknown to the commanders and men along the Piave, a decision was being made by the Armeecırberkommando that precluded any future success. In view of its implications, the battles of the next week and the conferences concerning the advisability of continuing the offensive became mere discussions of a moot point with no possible relevance to the actual state of affairs. On June 16 Colonel Pflug, of the Armeecırberkommando, sent a message to Waldstätten that twenty-

100 Ibid.

nine trainloads of supplies were being sent to the front by the morning of the 16th but that as soon as these supplies were used up, no more should be sent. 102 With the supply tap shut off, as of the morning of the 16th, there was really no hope for future success. The front commanders and troops were not told of this decision, and there is no evidence that the emperor was informed. So the army went blindly ahead with the battle and played out the charade until the end.

All the available reserves of the Isonzo army were thrown into the bridgeheads established by the VII and XXIII corps. The 29th division, which had been the reserve division for the VII corps, was committed on the 19th, and added some fresh impetus to the attack, but this effort, too, ground to a halt under the conditions of confusion, Italian viticulture, and supply shortages that had plagued the assault divisions of the first wave. 103 The attackers nearly reached the small town of Rovare before the advance petered out on the 21st. By this time the fourteen Austro-Hungarian divisions that were still on the Italian side of the Piave were now faced by thirty Italian divisions, and the need to retreat was becoming imperative. 104 The soldiers of the Isonzo army had done the best job that they could but they had been stymied by the fact of superior enemy numbers,

102 Pflug to Waldstätten, June 16, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, "Hofzug Stücke," p. 3. Once the supply flow had been halted, it could not be quickly restarted to take advantage of any success. To stop it at this time was a tacit admission of defeat.


104 Ibid., p. 63.
ailed and abetted by the mistakes of their own planners and field commanders. As one observer remarked, "what was not accomplished lay beyond the purview of the divisional commands." 105 Fortunately, the Italians had also been taking a beating in terms of casualties and were not anxious to close with the Austrians. The retreat across the river went nearly unnoticed by the Italian army. 106 It was a final mercy.

Throughout the disasters of the June Battles there remained one bright spot, and that was the success of the 6th army's attack on the Montello. The Montello was not a large hill, but standing as it did as the last outpost of the Tirolean mountains, it seemed to loom above the Italian plain to the east and south. With a sharply rising bluff, facing the Piave, the mountain presented a formidable military obstacle. Only the fear of leaving the Italian troops unmolested on the mountain and able to threaten the flank of the Isonzo army led to a decision to assault it. Waldstätten was dead set against the attack and often said so, but Archduke Joseph, commander of the 6th army, believed it to be a necessary gamble. Major General Goiginger, commander of the XXIV corps which was scheduled to assault the mountain, believed that he could carry out the task of taking it.

Initial artillery preparations for the Montello attack followed the general directives laid down for the other offensive operations, but Goiginger was unhappy about several aspects of the timing of the attack plan. Most importantly, he disagreed with the instructions

105 Kizzling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen Front," p. 28.

106 Novotny, Die 29. I. D. in der Juni-Piaveschlacht, p. 83.
directing that the infantry be ferried across the river at the conclusion of the artillery preparation. Instead, he argued, the troops should be slipped across the river under the cover of darkness to protect them from enemy artillery fire. His preferred schedule was not implemented, but he decided to follow his own instincts and the advice of his infantry commanders concerning the infantry crossing. Therefore, while the artillery preparation was still under way and darkness still held sway, the XXIV corps began crossing the river well before the scheduled jump-off time. When the artillery barrage lifted his men were already in position on the enemy shore. The crossing had been completed with "astoundingly low losses." One infantry regiment suffered only fifteen wounded in the crossing.

On the Montello the Italians were completely taken by surprise. They had been informed by a deserter about the Austro-Hungarian build-up, but had expected the attack to come on the 10th or 11th. When it did not come to pass on those dates, they relaxed. The rainswollen Piave and the strength of the Montello's defenses also bolstered their feeling of security; so they were unprepared for the attack when it did come, and further taken by surprise at the rapid appearance of the Austro-Hungarian infantrymen.


109 Sixth Army to 11th Army Command, June 25, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 446, 11th Army Command General Staff Division, Enemy Intelligence, 6th Army Command Operations No. 832/Ev. 42, in 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence No. 1074, July 2, 1918.
As was happening on the other attack fronts, the Austro-Hungarian soldiers were quickly discovering that their gas munitions had had little effect. The gas was so ineffective that the Italians appear to have believed that it was merely an artificial smoke-screen.\textsuperscript{110} Practically no gas casualties were discovered, but the attempt to employ the gas appears to have had a least an effect on Italian morale. Austro-Hungarian troops found numerous guns and positions evidently abandoned by the Italians due to fear of the gas. The guns turned out to be an unexpected boon as the Austrians were able to make use of them, partially compensating for their own inability to bring artillery across the river.\textsuperscript{111}

\textbf{DIAGRAM 3\textsuperscript{112}}

Schematic of the XXIV Corps Attack

\textsuperscript{110} Edmonds and Davies, \textit{Military Operations, Italy}, pp. 222-23.

\textsuperscript{111} Goiginger, "Die Piaveforcierung," p. 13.

\textsuperscript{112} Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht," p. 15.
Sixth army was also plagued by problems with its artillery pieces and other matériel. During the first three days of the offensive eighty-four guns went out of commission, twenty-eight due to explosions in the barrel. This did not help the peace of mind of the Austrian artillerymen. Expected artillery support from the neighboring corps failed to materialize, in the instance of the II corps because it had not been allocated sufficient munitions to assist Goiginger's corps, and in the case of the XVI corps because it had been issued only enough artillery shells for the first day of the battle.

Goiginger was able to rely only on his own resources for the infantry assault. He had no encouragement that he would be able to employ any of the army group or Armeekommando reserves; so his attack plan forced him to provide his corps reserves from among the attacking divisions—a rather desperate expedient (see Diagram 3). Thanks to the surprise achieved by shipping the infantry over the

113 Ibid., pp. 32-33. The artillery was not the only branch suffering from problems with its equipment. The infantry had been issued with the normal pattern "potato masher" grenades, but these were an economy model with cardboard handles. In the rain and river crossing the grenades got wet and the handles "metamorphosed into a slimy clump." This made them rather difficult to arm and throw. Even when the handles did not obviously disintegrate, they were weakened. Then, when the grenade was armed and cocked to be thrown, the handle might snap, precipitating the warhead into the men behind the thrower. A number of Austrian casualties thus came from their own grenades. This was an unfortunate event since the grenades were one weapon of which the Italians were terrified. After a couple of days, so were the Austrians. See "Erfahrungen 'Albrecht,'" Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeekommando Secret Operations No. 1781, Army Group Command Boroević Operations No. 985/2, July 23, 1918.

114 Goiginger, "Die Piaveforcierung," p. 13. This was another instance in which Waldstätten evidently promised a field commander something which he could not or had no intention of delivering.
river in the dark, combined with the lack of preparedness on the part of the Italian 58th division defending the Montello, the infantry attack went forward with commendable speed. The Austrians had managed to obtain at least a temporary, local superiority, and they hoped now to exploit it. 115

By 1000 the progress of the XXIV corps was favorable enough to convince Boročić to urge the Armeeoberkommando to release the two nearest divisions from their reserve (the 35th and 41st) for employment by the 6th army. 116 Waldstätten, however, had never been happy with the idea of an attack by the 6th army in the first place and he evidently was not going to retract his reservations just because the army had been successful. First of all, in view of the lack of progress by the 11th army, he ordered the 6th army general staff chief to cease the advance of the right wing of the 6th army attack and to concentrate on linking up the left wing to aid the Isonzo army's crossing at Papadopoli. 117 This action on his part

115 This battle is another instance of the type of problem encountered in dealing with Italian sources. A modern Italian general staff report speaks of the "full, concentrated strength of the 6th army," and the "numerical superiority" of the Austrians, and describes the first day of the action as a defense "of epic bravery." See "Zum Jahrestag der Schlachten am Piave," pp. 16-17 and 20. Another Entente officer claimed that the Italians were occupied all along the Piave and that for the first four days of the battle they were unable to concentrate reserves at any one point, while the Austrians continually committed new divisions. See Hoffnung-Goldsmith, Diary of a Liaison Officer in Italy, p. 111. The concentrated strength of the 6th army sounds fearsome, except for the fact that it only had one cavalry division and three infantry divisions, one rated as a reserve unit and the cavalry fit only for defensive duties. The actual attack superiority was less than 2-1, slim odds for an attack. Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 226; and Trevelyan, Scenes from Italy's War, p. 211, agree that the Italians committed a great many more divisions to the Montello than the Austrians.

was timid to the point of foolishness. The 11th army had not made any great breakthrough, but it had made several penetrations into the Italian line that concerned the Italian Supreme Command. If the 6th army continued its push with its right wing, the advance would have had the effect of threatening the rear and communications of the Entente armies in the Seven Communities and between the Piave and the Brenta. A threat such as this was more likely to lead to the defeat of the Italian Tirolean forces than a frontal attack, and to forego such an opportunity was overly cautious considering the stakes that were riding on the battle. There was also the minor problem that the Papadopoli attack had miscarried so badly that it is difficult to see how the 6th army could help the Isonzo army redeem the situation.

Waldstätten's second show of obstinacy was his refusal to release the two Armeeoberkommando reserve divisions to the 6th army. He did agree to give them the 41st division but pontificated "it was most emphatically impressed upon the 6th army command that they employ the reserves with economy." 118 The theory of the use of reserves in an offensive is that they should be employed to reenforce success. If Waldstätten was not willing to back wholeheartedly the greatest success of the day, what was he planning on using the reserve division for? A possibility is that Waldstätten was so convinced of defeat from the beginning that he did not want to commit the reserves under any circumstances. A second possibility is that

118 Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront, Pt. II, pp. 59-60. See also Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht," p. 3. There is a discrepancy between these two accounts concerning the time when this order was received, but they agree in important details.
Waldstätten was, as Cramon called him, too unsure of himself, and was being overly cautious, ignoring the lessons that had been learned at Caporetto. A final possibility is that since the battle was not following the course that Waldstätten had envisioned, he could not, or would not, readjust to the actual course of events.

By nightfall Goiginger had some reason to be happy with the progress of his corps. Over one-third of the Montello had been captured, along with 5,200 prisoners, mostly from the Lucca and Tevere brigades. Such a large number of prisoners from a single defending division is a good indication that the defense was not one of "epic bravery," as claimed by some Italian historians.

If the Italians were not putting up the greatest defense of the war on the Montello, the Austrians were also having their problems. The lack of qualified non-commissioned officers and junior officers made itself apparent as units quickly took their assigned objectives and then stopped and waited for further orders instead of advancing. If any of the dash show by Krauß' men at Flitsch had been exhibited by the units on the Montello, the mountain would have fallen on the first day and the breakthrough might have begun. Instead, lack of initiative and the original short-term goals for the attack stymied a real possibility for victory.

119 Army Group Command Boroević to Army Group Command Conrad, June 18, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Army Group Command Boroević Operations No. 301/1114 in Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence No. 28550/13.

At midnight the 6th army received further instructions from the Armeeoberkommando indicating that it should halt its move toward the west and instead concentrate on aiding the Isonzo army's battle to get across the Piave. A note of puzzlement appeared in a comment appended to this order in the 6th army war diary. After receiving the message, the author noted that the 2200 situation report of the Isonzo army had indicated that the XVI corps, whom the 6th army was supposed to aid, had already been thrown back across the river.\footnote{Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht," Pt. III, pp. 30-32.}

The fact of the matter was that the Armeeoberkommando was continuing to issue orders after it had apparently lost touch with the events of the battle. Instead of relying on the local commanders to interpret and react to the flow of events, or keeping directly in touch with circumstances, the Armeeoberkommando was trying to follow an outmoded plan by rote. Again, the Armeeoberkommando was refusing to believe or exploit advantages and opportunities that did not conform to its expectations—and the monarchy had too few advantages to be so prodigal with them.\footnote{A day such as the 15th would not have been complete without a question of social etiquette and courtly protocol. Among the bag of prisoners for the day was Lt. Georg Prince von Bourbon-Espagna, an officer of the Italian 164th regiment, and more importantly, a Habsburg relative. Since the prince's father was a cousin of Emperor Charles, Archduke Joseph was forced to query the Armeeoberkommando as to whether he was to treat the prince as a normal prisoner of war or an imperial relative. Since war was hell, he was treated as a normal prisoner of war on the order of Arz. See 6th Army Command to Armeeoberkommando, June 16, 1918, and the reply in Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, "Files without Numbers."} Twenty-fourth corps also had to contend with many of the same problems posed by the Piave that were bedeviling the Austro-Hungarian
units on the lower reaches of the river. During the night the current damaged and destroyed most of the bridges that the corps had managed to build across the river. Then, early on the morning of the 16th, an airplane destroyed another bridge. Reenforcements could not be rushed across the river under these circumstances, and Goiginger had to be satisfied with shipping just the remaining units of the three attack divisions across the Piave and depending on the corps' internal resources to keep the pressure on the Italians. The divisions were short of munitions and had little food, but the Italians were making no great efforts to dislodge them. Some independent action on the part of scattered units led to a temporary penetration to Collsel Val d. Acqua, but the corps found itself stretched so thin that its inadequate reserves could not defend the perimeter created by the advance, so the troops were withdrawn. By the evening of the 16th the corps was back in the same positions that it had held early in the day, but it had taken a further 1,600 prisoners, including two officers and 146 men of the Czech legion.\(^{123}\)

It was hoped that the advance could continue, reenforced and rested, on the 17th but circumstances conspired against Goiginger. The remaining infantry units of the three divisions were brought across the Piave, and elements of the 41st Honvéd division moved forward to use the same bridges. The rain had begun to swell the river again, however, and the bridges weakened. The 13th Schützen division's bridge was able only to bear men and animals. No guns could be taken across the river in this sector so the artillery

units had to use the 31st division's bridge. All of these circumstances were expending valuable time and preventing a true buildup in strength on the Montello. As a result of these delays, and the Armeeoberkommando's instructions, the main effort on the 17th was directed an enlarging the bridgehead to the southeast, past Nervesa. This mission was partially accomplished, but by now casualties among the three divisions were running so high that the commanders were urging a halt for reorganization and replacement of losses. After some consideration, Goiginger agreed, and it was decided that the 18th was to be a day of regrouping and renewed preparations. On the 18th the weather again precluded any extensive redeployment. The rains had caused the river to rise up to two feet above its already swollen state, and by 1000 the XXIV corps had to report that all of its bridges had been destroyed or swept away. The lack of bridges made it nearly impossible to bring more men and supplies across the river. The corps' boats were too small to transport artillery, and four days of harassment by Entente planes and guns had severely reduced their numbers. The Armeeoberkommando's lack of commitment to the Montello battle meant that the corps had been short of boats and bridges prior to the attack, and that they were still not receiving the necessary replacements.

The divisions already across the Piave were exhausted and weakened, and their plight was exacerbated by the fact that very

\[124^{*}\text{Ibid.}, pp. 295-97.\]
\[125^{*}\text{Ibid.}, p. 297. \text{See also Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht," Pt. I, p. 18.}\]
little artillery had managed to get across the river to help them. They had to rely on their captured Italian guns and their "hurrah batteries," and these were no match for the Italian medium and heavy guns bombarding them. For the first time, on the 18th, the question arose as to whether the bridgehead should be abandoned.\footnote{Ibid., Pt. III, pp. 25-26. "Hurrah batteries" was the name given by the Austrians to the officially named "infantry accompanying batteries." These were six-gun batteries assigned to each infantry regiment. They were small mountain howitzers or cannons that could be moved entirely by manpower. It was hoped that they could help make up for the monarchy's deficiency in mobile artillery units.}

On the 19th, the crisis continued unabated. Men, but not supplies, could be transported across the river in small boats. Finally, at noon, the XXIV corps requested the 6th army headquarters to stop sending troops across the Piave because they could not be supplied once they reached the Montello.\footnote{Ibid., Pt. III, p. 29.} At 1800 Boroević ordered the 6th army to "cease unnecessary munitions usage."\footnote{Ibid., Pt. IV, Op. No. 619/33, n. p.} The problem left to the 6th army to decide was how to define "unnecessary" when most of the army was defending itself in an exposed bridgehead. Archduke Joseph reported that some of the units on the Montello were entirely out of ammunition and reduced to repelling Italian arditi with "empty weapons."\footnote{Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1780, p. (267). This is a copy of the Jansa Report and is in all ways identical to Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/I except that it also contains remarks by Boroević and Archduke Joseph that are not found in the original report. "Arditi" was the name given by the Italians to specially trained soldiers who performed duties similar to the Central Powers' storm troops.}
That evening the press telegram from the Armeеберкомандо cheerfully reported that the Italians were making preparations for a retreat to the Adige River. 131 This may have been accurate, but the Austrians were also thinking about retreating. Waldstätten, Pflug, Boroević, and their staffs met on the 19th to consider the question. Waldstätten had never favored the 6th army attack, Boroević had never favored an attack at all, and Pflug had stopped the supply trains on the first day of the offensive. This conference allowed each of them to reenforce the others' forebodings as they gloomed over all of the monarchy's problems. It is hardly surprising that the conference reached a decision to recommend an evacuation of the Montello. 132 There was also another matter. The German Supreme Command had called Pflug from Spa and asked him which Austrian artillery batteries were designated for immediate transport to France. Since Pflug was not aware that any batteries had been promised to the Germans, he was understandably perplexed. 133 Obviously, decisions were taking place at higher levels that had not been transmitted downward.

131 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeeoberkommando Press Telegram No. 129, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence No. 28750/46.

132 "Pitreich, Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. II, p. 83. Pitreich was Boroevic's chief of staff and has always remained completely loyal to the field marshal. It is of interest to note that his monograph largely ignores the fact that Goiginger wished to hold out on the Montello. Evidence indicates that the situation was not hopeless. On the 20th the 139th infantry regiment captured 3,200 prisoners and the 41st division captured three artillery pieces and prisoners from eight Italian regiments. See p. 92. Pitreich appears to dismiss this information as meaningless.

133 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1718, pp. (171-72).
On June 20, 1918, the emperor and Arz visited the front in order to confer with the various commanders, but especially with Major General Goiginger. The commander of XXIV corps was full of enthusiasm for a continuation of the offensive. His corps had finally gotten its bridgehead consolidated. The Italian counterattacks had been thwarted, and more important, he argued, the weather had at last cleared and the high water was rapidly receding. Goiginger clearly knew how to proceed. First, the bridgehead must be extended to the south. Second, the 6th army must establish a strong artillery park by Vidor to provide support fire. Third, three bridges must immediately be constructed in addition to a reliable aerial tramway across the Piave. Finally, air activity should be increased and concentrated over the one bridgehead. 134

As to why the bridgehead must be maintained, Goiginger argued from three basic points. It was a strong and easily defensible position. If the offensive were to be renewed at any time in the future, it would provide an ideal, ready-made jumping off point. Another positive aspect was that artillery emplaced on the Montello would enfilade Italian lines, forcing the Italians voluntarily to surrender their positions around Vidor and Susegana. Finally, if the first four conditions were met, the Montello could be held with few casualties. 135 An added bonus would also accrue: the Italians could not safely launch an attack of their own across the Piave if the Austro-Hungarian army held the Montello.

135 Ibid., p. 18.
In light of this presentation of the advantages in remaining on the Montello, Goiginger was flabbergasted when Emperor Charles asked him if the Montello could be evacuated without great sacrifice. The general argued that a withdrawal would be more hazardous than the initial storming of the mountain and insisted that such an evacuation would be a terrible blow to the morale of the army. Nevertheless, on the same evening Goiginger received official orders from the Armeooberkommando to withdraw his corps from the Montello.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 17. See also Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht," Pt. III, pp. 37 and 43.}

There is no way of knowing for certain whether Goiginger was correct in wishing to continue the offensive or at least consolidate positions on the Montello into a solid and defensible bridgehead. His arguments were cogent and had great merit. Their weakness was that Goiginger was at a relatively low level in the command structure and was unaware of the undercurrents in the situation. The Armeooberkommando, in the person of Waldstätten, had been opposed to the 6th army's offensive, and as a result had not been prepared to exploit its success. The release of fresh troops from the reserve was half-heartedly implemented, and it was insufficient to compensate for the lack of artillery, bridging equipment, and air support. In light of the attitude of Waldstätten, Boroević, and the majority of the Armeooberkommando, the visit by Charles and Arz to the XXIV corps headquarters was really nothing more than a gesture. The decision had already been made, and Goiginger really had no chance to change it without some dramatic fait accompli, which he was unable to provide. Unprepared for success in the Montello sector,
everyone seemed unable to appreciate the true importance of the mountain except Goiginger, and it was easy to dismiss his enthusiasm as that typical of any local commander.

It was a more momentous decision to evacuate the Montello than is generally recognized. While it is unlikely that Goiginger's rather grandiose plans for a future offensive were feasible, his arguments for retaining the mountain were sound. In the long run, the evacuation made one point obvious to everyone on both sides of the front. Austria-Hungary had given up the hope of any future offensives in Italy. This conclusion was inescapable, since it would have been criminal to ask the army to retake such a bastion at any future time. Retreat amounted to an unmistakable renunciation of future offensives and thus of victory in Italy. The initiative was now to pass to the Entente Powers on the Italian peninsula.

During the next two nights the XXIV corps completed a withdrawal that was conducted with as much skill as the original assault. Despite Italian claims that the pressure of their attack caused the Austro-Hungarian withdrawal to degenerate into a "disorderly flight" across the Piave, the bulk of the evidence indicates that the Italians did not immediately even notice the absence of the Austrian soldiers. Nevertheless, the battle was ended and the Austrians were shaken out of their midsummer night's dream that had become a nightmare.

As a victory offensive the June Battle was obviously a failure for the Austrians. No ground was permanently won and the monarchy had wasted valuable supplies. It would be incorrect, however, to consider the battle as a complete catastrophe for the monarchy. Casualties were approximately equal, and Austria-Hungary may actually have suffered fewer total losses than the Entente Powers. Borojević's army group suffered approximately 27,000 dead and missing, and Army Group Conrad lost about 16,000, but these units took 50,000 Italians prisoner. Casualties in the mountain fighting were in favor of the Entente, but again numerous Italians were taken prisoner. One fairly informed estimate is that total Austrian casualties for the June Battles were 69,079 as opposed to an Italian toll of 84,830.139

In retrospect, it does appear that Austrian hopes for victory in the June Battles were based more on a vague optimism than on concrete facts. There was no reason for the army to believe it could not have won the battle, however, since the failure was not in the basic concept of an offensive but rather in its planning and execution. These failures have been extensively dealt with in earlier chapters. Possibly these mistakes alone precluded victory, but the failures in the execution of the operation were also evident. The single worst failure was in the handling of security. In an effort to preserve secrecy the soldiers were not adequately trained or briefed as to the goals of the battle. In addition, adequate

139 Waldstätten, "Montello-Schlacht," Appendix 36/12. The question of casualties is always one of the most difficult to answer about a battle.

140 Falls, Caporetto, p. 167.
reconnaissance was foregone in order to conceal the monarchy's intentions. Yet, as we have seen, the Italians were fully aware of the Austrians' goals and methods. Some of this information came from deserters— but it is also obvious that the Armeeoberkommando was only interested in security precautions at the front. The same rules did not seem to apply to rear echelon officers. A correspondent for the Arbeiterzeitung heard exact news of the offensive as early as late May, and an officer in the War Press Office learned of the offensive beforehand through his children, who got the word from classmates at school. Surely there has seldom been so public a secret.

Under circumstances when the enemy's soldiers know more about the offensive than one's own, it is to be expected that the Austrians would have been beaten and easily repulsed. This was not entirely the case. The Entente was convinced, of course, that it had won a smashing victory. An Italian politician trumpeted that this was the "victory which decided the fate of the Central Empires," and an Italian general staff study concurs that it was a great military victory that "decided the fate of the First World War," and "brought the end of the war." The British commander in Italy firmly believed that in the June Battles, the Austrian army totally "lost

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141 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, Army Press Headquarters, Adj. No. 13085, June 30, 1918.


143 "Zum Jahrestag der Schlachten am Piave," pp. 4 and 22.
cohesion," while a junior British artillery officer (later a member of parliament) enthusiastically believed that "never before had so great an attack, so well prepared, been so thoroughly beaten." The Germans appear to have subscribed to this evaluation also. Hindenburg stated that after the June Battles "the Danube Monarchy ceased to be a danger to Italy," and he told an Austrian diplomat that Austria was "no longer a factor to be seriously reckoned with."  

As we have seen, however, the battle did not present an entirely bleak picture for the Dual Monarchy. The results of the battle had probably ensured that Austria-Hungary could no longer harbor the idea of a future offensive, but the fighting had also forestalled an Entente offensive planned for the summer and inflicted severe damage on the Italian army. The heavy fighting, particularly around the Montello, had chewed up the Italian reserves at a rapid rate. Despite the urging of both the British and French commanders that a follow-up offensive be immediately set in motion, Diaz refused to consider such an action because of the heavy casualties in the Italian army. In fact, the Italians were so badly hurt that they decided that it was impossible for them to carry out a summer offensive at

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144 Cavan, "Tactical and Strategic Considerations of the Italian Campaign," p. 17.
145 Dalton, With the British Guns in Italy, p. 213.
146 Hindenburg, Out of My Life, p. 367.
147 Windischgratz, Memoirs, p. 191.
148 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 215. See also Villari, War on the Italian Front, p. 211.
all, and that they would have to delay any such move until the late autumn. The opposite side of the coin, however, was that the Austrians could send no troops to France to participate in the July battles.

An interested observer of the military situation in Italy was the United States. The Americans had to decide whether they should send troops to Italy or to France, and the June Battles made the point moot. The American observer in Italy informed Pershing that the English and French were of the opinion that the battle which the Austrians had planned was sound, but its failure showed extreme weaknesses in the Austrian army. It was decided, therefore, to send the American soldiers to France, except for a token regiment that would take part in the final campaign in Italy.

If the attack was not a success, the retreat back across the Piave was not a great rout. Many Austrians felt more that they had been defeated by the elements or by the lack of necessary war materiel than by the Italians. The combat officers had carried out the attack with no signs of loss of morale, and after a day's

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150 McEntee, Italy's War, p. 99.


153 Cramon, Unser österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 178.
rest and some food the morale of the soldiers was again reported to be high.\footnote{154} Still, something was now missing. The feeling was expressed by a young storm troop leader who remarked "what is happening now is a pining away—and considering the impossibility of filling the gaps, a slow bleeding—without future, without hope. How it will end is a mystery to us."\footnote{155}

At the root of the problem was the fact that if the June Battles had been a military draw, they amounted to a terrific psychological defeat for the Austrians. Too much had been expected from the battle for anyone to settle for less than victory; it had come to mean too many things to too many people in the empire. The Dual Monarchy had girded itself and called forth its last reserves of men, munitions, and moral force, hoping to achieve a final great victory that at one blow would end the war and relieve the suffering. The blow had gone astray, and with it went the faith of the peoples of the empire in their leaders.\footnote{156}

As a psychological battle the June fighting also greatly lifted Italian morale.\footnote{157} Prisoner of war interrogations had reported an extremely high rate of desertions from the Italian army; particularly by southern Italians, and general disaffection which was not limited


\footnote{155} Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 80.


\footnote{157} Villari, The War on the Italian Front, p. 214.
to only a few localities. Strains had also shown up in relations between the Italians and the English and French soldiers. While these problems did not disappear, they were alleviated. An Italian has stated that "before Caporetto, our soldiers fought only because of discipline, self-preservation, and from fear of punishment; after Caporetto, from love of fatherland." This was a spirit evident in the Piave battles, as despite lapses, indecision, and sometimes panic, many Italian soldiers resisted fiercely and counterattacked with vigor—in the final analysis, enough of them did. After three years of stalemate and defeat, the Italians had repulsed a major offensive. Now their morale was on the rise and a turning point had been reached in the Italian campaign.

158 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group No. 29650/39, June 24, 1918; and Enemy Intelligence Group No. 29950/12d, July 10, 1918.

159 Aldo Valari, La Guerra Italo-Austriaca, as quoted in Frohlich Der Kampf um die Berge Tirols, p. 17.
CHAPTER VII

"A BORING, WASTEFUL, AND MUDDLED AFFAIR"\textsuperscript{1}

Barbara Tuchman has commented that "nothing so comforts the military mind as the maxim of a great but dead general,"\textsuperscript{2} but she has missed the mark. The military mind is also a human mind and therefore takes even greater solace in finding that someone else was responsible for the most recent disaster. It is a feature of any administrative structure that calamity calls forth investigating commissions, and that the goal of any such commission is to point the accusing finger somewhere, anywhere, but not in the direction of the sponsors of the commission. It is the bureaucratic manifestation of getting there "fustest with the mostest."\textsuperscript{3}

Loyal to this tradition, before the smoke of battle had fully cleared, the Armeeoberkommando set out to assign responsibility for the failure of the Austro-Hungarian army during the June Battles. On June 23, 1918, an order was issued to all general staff officers attached to lower command echelons to collect and evaluate the experiences of the battle. They were to attempt to ferret out the

\textsuperscript{1}With apologies to Archibald Wavell.


\textsuperscript{3}I realize, of course, that there is some doubt as to whether Nathan Bedford Forrest was really this illiterate, but alliteration is to the author what artillery is to the general.
reasons for the defeat, to detect the weaknesses and strengths of
the Austro-Hungarian army, and to state their own observations with
candor. The officers did so, and it is to their credit that their
reports appeared to give a frank and honest evaluation of the situa-
tion. If the reports concentrate more on the technical aspects of
the offensive than on the command responsibility, it is a flaw that
is to be expected—and if command responsibility is sometimes glossed
over or tilted in favor of the prejudices of the Armeeoberkommando,
it is not forgotten, as it could have been.  

Naturally, the front line commanders reacted unfavorably to
this inquiry. They believed that the investigations were an ill-
considered attempt on the part of the Armeeoberkommando to find
fault with their decisions, leadership, and competence. Though the
Armeeoberkommando would probably have denied that such an intention
was a primary aim, the local commanders were basically correct in
their assumption because such a goal was at least implicit in the
action. This point was obvious to everyone concerned and, as a re-
sult, a certain amount of charges and countercharges were hurled
about, both between commanders and the Armeeoberkommando officers
and between different command levels.

Some of this bickering amounted to no more than a rather mild
disagreement in opinion. For example, when the XV corps stated that

4"Erfahrungen der letzten Kämpfe," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna),
Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1717, June 23, 1918.

5Fiala, Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs, covers this ques-
tion thoroughly and competently. Aside from Dr. Fiala's tendencies
to see Conrad as the root of all evil, I have no great quarrel with
him.
"small unit leadership was fully adequate," the reporting officer, Lt. Colonel Brendl, merely noted "XXVI corps said the opposite." More serious were the problems caused by the method of approach; the inquiry was held outside of proper channels. The following series of events, which was by no means atypical, illustrates the type of dissension that this unusual procedure could create. An Armyoberkommando officer, Colonel Szakall, questioned a divisional commander about the state of preparedness of his division and received a rather lugubrious reply as the general outlined the conditions under which his unit had to fight. Upon reading the report, the corps commander felt constrained to defend his own actions in regard to the division and appended to the report his own version of events. Among other things, he asserted that the divisional commander was "not well oriented about his own munitions situation," and described some of the other claims as "incorrect" and "ridiculous." He stated that the divisional commander had been satisfied with circumstances prior to the battle and had made none of his complaints known to the corps headquarters after the offensive. The corps commander concluded his remarks with the observation that to tolerate a situation in which charges based just on circumstantial evidence would be conveyed to the highest command outside of usual service channels was highly unsatisfactory.

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7 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757/I, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 43a/Sz, June 30, 1918, pp. 1-5 (807, 808, 811, and 812); and XIII Corps Command Operations No. 707/6, n. d., pp. 857-60.
Eleventh army command tried to pour oil on the troubled waters by enclosing its own statement, laden with mollifying words, but it probably came too late to heal the breach that had been created between the two officers concerned. Other officers were upset by what they considered to be meddling on the part of the Armeeoberkommando, but Boroević appears to have been the most annoyed. In a report emanating from his own army group, he enclosed the following observation:

It is an event unheard of in the army that criticism of the leadership by unnamed and unanswerable individuals should be officially instigated. Where will such things lead? Has no one realized that every criticism of the Armeeoberkommando indirectly involves the commander in chief of the army, who must certainly remain above all criticism? I say that it is absolutely inadmissible.

The dispatch of officers of the Armeeoberkommando to the soldiers in the manner in which it has occurred is completely pointless because these officers can only confirm what has already been repeatedly reported earlier by the accountable commanders. They can also achieve no remedies that the Armeeoberkommando has the means at its disposal to alleviate. They awaken hopes that cannot be fulfilled and thereby do damage instead of being of use.

Boroević, fm. 8

Such a missive coming from the loyal "Croatian thickhead" is sure evidence that a hornet's nest had been stirred up. Whether or not the Armeeoberkommando was wise in using this procedure to conduct their inquiry, the information acquired presents a detailed picture of the Austro-Hungarian army in its decline.

It was perhaps understandable that practically none of the reports admitted that the Italians were a significant factor in the

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8 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1780, pp. (268-60). This pagination is correct. Boroević's remarks are on pages numbered 267, 268, 260 (in that sequence).
battle's outcome over and beyond their sheer weight of numbers. The soldiers continued to consider themselves as better fighters than the Italians on a man-to-man basis and believed that they had been defeated primarily by inclement weather and matériel factors. In the case of the English infantry, it was a different matter. One report rated the English infantryman as highly competent in trench warfare and found it remarkable that, in spite of the confused and dangerous situation within the English lines on the first day of the battle, the Tommy had "awaited our attack, laughing, with pipe in mouth." 9

Another matter about which there was near unanimity was the great dissatisfaction with security procedures, both in general and in regard to deserters. Although numerous English prisoners of war claimed that they knew nothing about the attack beforehand and were thus caught by surprise, it is evident from other interrogations that the English officers were completely aware of the impending attack. 10 Since the British official history acknowledges the fact that the Entente forces were completely informed about it, one wonders whether the English officers deliberately withheld the information about the attack from their men--and if so, why? 11 That, however, is another

9 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757, Operations No. 43b/Sz.


11 Gladden, Across the Piave, pp. 118-19, mentions hearing an officer warn about a gas attack but not believing him. Gladden was one of the few enlisted men to write about his experiences and corroborates the idea that enlisted men were not informed of the attack.
story.

The general problems of security have already been alluded to in the previous chapters. A primary problem was simply the lack of exact knowledge of enemy positions due to insufficient reconnais-
sance. A final complaint was that the attempt to preserve secrecy by failing to fully inform the soldiers as to their missions and goals, and by failing to completely train and prepare them for par-
ticular circumstances, was not only folly, but a complete contradic-
tion of Point 99 in the Battle Instructions, Part 12. As was so often the case in the June Battles, the Armeeoberkommando ignored its own instructions, and since these precepts were based on the battle experience gained during the war, they were ignored only at great risk.

It was to be expected that a large volume of the post-battle griping centered on the dissatisfaction of the infantrymen with the artillery. The infantrymen believed blame should be ascribed to the artillery for loss of the battle, and they berated the artillerymen in scathing terms. The artillerymen, while agreeing that the overall performance of their branch was substandard, believed that the fault lay with factors outside of their purview. The evidence indicates that the latter is probably correct. The totality of the complaints cannot easily be categorized, however, since they are

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12 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. 10 (380).
13 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/III, (Jansa Re-
port), p. 3 (522).
often interrelated.

At the root of the entire matter was probably the question of incomplete preparations and the resulting lack of supplies. A number of reports questioned the haste with which the preparations had been carried out, and one went so far as to state that all of the matériel shortages were caused by the Armeeoberkommando's insistence on June 15 as a termination date for battle arrangements, a date for which insufficient reasons were given. "The circumstances on the French war front did not necessitate this termination date," the report concluded.

Exacerbating the haste with which preparations had to be made for the attack was the difficulty of transportation. First of all, there were not enough horses to fulfill even normal transportation duties much less a buildup. Some artillery batteries were reduced to only one horse. Those horses that were available were often in poor physical shape. An artillery brigade commander complained that his horses were attempting to eat the wood of their feed troughs because there was no fodder available. Daily, four to six of the remaining horses in his unit were dying, and the survivors could

\[15\] Ibid., p. 10 (380). See also Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757/II, Operations No. 43c/52, p. (817), for the report of the commander of the 21st field artillery regiment. Among other complaints, the officer stated that batteries were rushed into positions on the last day, placed in the wrong locations, and then one hour before the beginning of the barrage given fire plans based on a correct positioning. He also stated that the majority of the gas shells arrived at the last minute and that some batteries, as a result, received only one-third of their allotment.

\[16\] Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. (389).

barely move themselves about—moving heavy guns was out of the question. Another commander, in endorsing a report to the Armeeoberkommando, stated, "it is not really appreciated what it means to move batteries into high mountain positions without horses and with reduced manpower."19

Material shortages in the artillery stemming from hasty preparations and lack of sufficient transport were widespread.20 The artillery's inability to sustain heavy supporting fire was particularly galling to the infantry in view of the apparently unlimited ammunition supply of the Entente forces.21 The reasons for the shortage and for the discontent were probably summed up best by one of the officers who wrote:

The munitions situation stemmed from a variety of circumstances—the iron shortage, the shortage of workers, and particularly the transport difficulties; these are catch-phrases that the soldiers will not understand. The men cry constantly for munitions, and with justice. The infantry no longer accepts the answer of the artillery—'we have no more munitions.' They now think only 'the artillery has not supported us adequately and not accomplished that which we expected.'22

18 Pengov, Wahrheit über die Piaveschlacht, p. 11.
20 See Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757/II, Operations No. 43c/Sz, p. (817), for the 21st artillery regiment; Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, pp. 10-11, for the 11th army; Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1867, p. 10 (320), for the 22nd infantry division (Tonale Pass); and Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740, pp. 7-8 (516), for the 6th army.
22 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 5055, pp. 5-6 (837-38).
Despite the volume of complaints concerning the lack of guns and shells, several of the Armeeoberkommando officers were not willing to accept this as a valid complaint. After hearing a long tale of woe about the lack of gas shells and the ineffectiveness of the gas, Lt. Colonel Brendl exploded, "What do they expect from gas? Full suppression of the enemy artillery?" He went on to contend that the fault lay not in the shortage or ineffectiveness of the gas shells but rather with Conrad's insistence on attacking in a wooded zone. The only reason the gas did not work properly, he stated, was because it was employed in woods and "one does not attack in a wooded zone." This conclusion is highly debatable, of course. The complaints about the gas also came from units in non-wooded areas, and such a flat rejection of the concept of fighting in wooded areas appears merely to be an effort to attach blame for the defeat to Conrad.

Other Armeeoberkommando officers questioned the thesis that Austria-Hungary had too little artillery without being quite so dogmatic. Colonel Szakall remarked that the artillery preparation was ineffective but went on to state that on paper the Austro-Hungarian army employed a perfectly adequate number of artillery pieces in the offensive. The problem, he concluded, lay not with the artillerymen, who had accomplished "what spirit and will allowed," but rather with the composition and employment of the guns. His point was well made; it was not a question of the number of guns but the employment of

those that existed over too great a frontage and the woeful shortage of medium and heavy artillery. Finally, he concluded that the plan for the artillery preparation was based on a theory evolved at a time when the shell allotments were four to five times greater than was possible in June.  

Szakall's criticism of the artillery preparation brought two more interrelated problems to the forefront: the difficulty of observation and the theory of employment of artillery. The matter of observation was a primary issue and one that is most difficult to deal with. The Austrians' lack of suitable observation points has been dealt with in the previous chapter. The crux of the matter was that there was only one possible solution to their problem and that was to achieve aerial superiority. As one reporting officer stated, "air superiority gives artillery superiority, and artillery superiority decides battles." The infantry and artillery tended to blame the fliers for their own lack of success, but, as we have seen, the pilots were inexperienced, outnumbered, and flying inferior aircraft. Without imaginative employment of airpower their defeat was inevitable, and the Entente air forces became "the unchallenged masters of the air." Austria's one attempt to achieve at least local superiority by stripping the mountain front of aircraft and concentrating them on the Piave achieved nothing. The

24 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 43b/Sz, p. 1 (797). See also Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. 10 (380).


26 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 142.268, p. 8 (378).
most bitter comment came from an officer who believed "our pilots are too few and are of little value. In spite of this, they all have gold medals for bravery."\(^27\) In view of the odds against them, however, the pilots' bravery should not be questioned.

The observation problem presented another drawback to the planned employment of the artillery in addition to the obvious matter of an unregistered fall of fire. The Austrians were eager to emulate the lessons learned by the Germans, and as a consequence they were attempting to use the Bruchmüller ranging and targeting system. As one Armeoberkommando officer was forced to point out, any attempt to follow slavishly the Germans' Western Front lessons was bound to fail. First, the Austro-Hungarian army was not sufficiently trained in Hutier and Bruchmüller's tactics to take fullest advantage of their system. Second, the lack of adequate observation and communications equipment merely accentuated the inability of the imperial and royal army to function with the precision required by the method.\(^28\) This officer's comment was echoed by another report which asserted that the rolling barrage called for in the artillery plan was impossible to implement in mountainous terrain.\(^29\) A further note remarked somewhat cynically that a rolling barrage might be effective in France, but certainly was not useful

\(^{27}\) *Armeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734*, p. (388).


\(^{29}\) *Armeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757, 10th Army Command Operations No. 5055*, p. 9 (841). See also *Armeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734*, p. (388).
in mountains, the more so because it was a method that wasted shells that the empire could not afford to expend.\footnote{Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, p. (876).}

About the only bright spot in a long list of exasperations with the artillery was the general satisfaction expressed with the performance of the infantry "accompanying" batteries. These units had been formed in an attempt to compensate for the lack of mobility of the bulk of the Austro-Hungarian artillery force. One battery, composed of small, light, 75 mm mountain guns and mountain howitzers, was assigned to each infantry regiment in the assault waves. The guns were to be moved forward strictly by manpower and were to operate in the front lines as artillery support in direct cooperation with the infantry. Despite misuse of some of the batteries by artillery commanders, who ordered them to join in the opening bombardment, and despite the tendency of replacement officers to fill the ranks of the "hurrah" batteries with whoever was at hand (one battery was assigned a partially paralyzed replacement), the guns went forward with the initial assault and did yeoman service, particularly in combat against strongpoints and armored cars.\footnote{Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/II, p. 10 (542). See also Secret Operations No. 1763, 3rd Mountain Artillery Regiment, 2nd Mountain Gun Battery Res. No. 89, p. (891).}

Other complaints about the artillery's role in the June Battles ranged from denunciations of the large number of dud shells, through the communications difficulties cited earlier, and arguments over the proper mixture of shrapnel, high explosive, and gas shells that should be distributed to each battery, to the oft-mentioned
disappointment with the gas shells.\footnote{Some final observations should be made about the effectiveness of the poison gas. The success of the gas attack at Caporetto had encouraged the Austro-Hungarian army to place too great faith in its efficacy. The army overlooked the fact that the Germans had supplied the bulk of the gas used at Caporetto. The empire had not developed any of the new war gases on its own and the Germans were not about to divert their supplies from the Western Front. Major General Goiginger stated that gas was only useful if it was effective and if the enemy did not have proper protection. Both of these suppositions failed during the June Battles. See Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1723, XXIV Corps Command Operations No. 603/12, p. 2 (273). In an effort on the part of the Armeeoberkommando to defuse the question, one of the reporting officers admitted that the gases used were weak and ineffective, but he argued that this was unimportant. What mattered, he wrote, was that the Italians were terrified about the possibility that the gas might be the same as that used at Caporetto. As a result the gas had a great morale effect that nearly compensated for its lack of potency. See Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/II, p. 1 (538). This is a questionable argument. It is true that the gas had a morale effect in that on the Montello some Italians seem to have deserted their positions out of sheer fear of the gas. Nevertheless, such fear is easily assuaged by seeing men walking unharmed through gas clouds without wearing a gas mask. A frightened soldier can be rallied; a dead one cannot. The final conclusion seems to be that the gas was not nearly so effective as it should have been, but that even if it were, it would not have matched the expectations held for it by the combat units. It is also interesting to note that the Armeeoberkommando did not request any of the more deadly German gases because the normal Austrian gas masks were ineffective against it. Gas escalation on the Italian front would have been extremely dangerous for the Austro-Hungarian empire and the Armeeoberkommando did not want such an increased employment of poison gas.}

As was to be expected, a large number of the criticisms registered with the staff officers by the troops concerned problems relevant only to a specific unit. The men of the 22nd infantry division in the Tonale Pass, for instance, were very upset because, although they were fighting in the high mountains, they had only been issued normal summer uniforms and were shortage nearly 2,500 steel helmets. They also noted another problem that had not been obvious to the men
of the division before the battle. The stick hand grenade only had a time fuse, which meant that when it was thrown up a steep slope, as was usually the case when making a mountain assault, the grenade demonstrated a disturbing tendency to roll back down the hill on the thrower before exploding. The division earnestly recommended that such grenades also be issued with contact fuses. \(^{33}\)

Twenty-second division also contained a large percentage of men from the various national minorities and was largely officered by men from the middle classes; therefore, the divisional report stressed the need for greater newspaper censorship, commenting that the Italians were getting their best propaganda directly from the monarchy's own newspapers and that this was more effective than their normal efforts. They also suggested that "good, patriotic daily papers" be shipped to the front. On a more personal basis, the division's report pointed out that a large number of the unit's officers were from families that were not well off, and as a result they worried constantly about the welfare of their relatives at home. \(^{34}\) Such a distraction was detrimental to the performance of their military duties. In such circumstances the army would have to consider whether their pay scales were appropriate to a mass army.

Soldiers fighting on the Piave had their own specific problems that often differed from those encountered by the men in the Tirol. Many of the concerns expressed on the Piave front were over the question of mobility. Their suggestions ranged from a request

\(^{33}\) Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1867, pp. 8-10 (319-20).

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 12 (321).
for the development of a small, light bridge that could be hand-carried or easily towed for employment over the numerous small canals and waterways encountered in Italian viticulture, to a note that the field kitchens supplied by the army were too heavy for normal assault bridging so that there was no way of getting warm cooked food to the front lines across a river. The report also noted that the hand-carried machine guns, used in this battle for the first time, were very effective but still heavy, and that a lighter mount should be issued for use by the regular machine guns during a battle of movement. Finally, a major difficulty was the seemingly mundane problem of ammunition boxes. The ones presently in use by the infantry were so heavy that it took at least two men to carry one. If one of the carriers was wounded, the remaining man could do nothing. It was suggested that smaller boxes in greater numbers would negate this problem and would facilitate the distribution of ammunition in the midst of a battle.35

One interesting comment came from an Armeeoberkommando officer who, after hearing numerous complaints about how difficult, or impossible, it was to conduct an offensive in a fog (visibility in some sectors was only five to ten yards during the early phases of the battle), exploded, "it is remarkable that the Germans on March 21, 1918, and at Tolmein achieved the greatest success in foggy weather--and we cannot endure this weather."36 The comment is particularly interesting because it points out one of the possible


fallacies of the whole Armeeoberkommando investigation: the alibi syndrome. Any reader must be prepared to do more than accept the complaints at face value. There is no doubt that most of the matters mentioned formed a justifiable basis for mutterings of discontent. They illustrate graphically the shortcomings in the Austro-Hungarian army as perceived by its men and officers. But we must question whether each of these shortcomings actually had a direct influence on the final outcome of the battle. Some of them, particularly in the artillery branch, undoubtedly were important, but the majority were technical difficulties and only that. Austria had won previous battles with the same faulty equipment and doctrine, and the same kind of ill-prepared troops; so the final fault for the defeat did not lie in the technical sphere.

Real responsibility for the defeat sustained by the empire in June, 1918, can be found in the next general category of criticisms. Although there are several interrelated subjects, they can all be subsumed under the general heading of leadership responsibility. The attack plan, the intitial haste and its consequent matériel shortages, the undernourishment of the troops, and the lack of real leadership and initiative at the lower command levels are faults that can all be traced directly back to the Armeeoberkommando. The greatest interest and value of the reports lie in these areas, because for the first time the leadership of the army, and implicitly the emperor himself, were being criticized.

Repeatedly during the course of the June Battles the Austrians had come to the threshold of success, only to be thwarted by their own ineptness as much as by the enemy. A large share of the fault
in each circumstance rested on the inability of the junior officers to grasp the situation or the initiative. As has been noted, particularly during the fighting on the Montello, the units would quickly reach their assigned goals and then stop and await further orders. From an early date, the Austro-Hungarian army had realized that its officer corps was not meeting its expectations or traditional standards of command, and it had attempted to alleviate the situation to the best of its ability. In late March the 11th army, seriously worried about morale and the desertion rate in its sector, admonished its officers to take more interest in their men and reminded them that the officers were ultimately responsible for the welfare and actions of the soldiers. This was a self-evident proposition, and it is highly indicative that the officers needed to be reminded of the fact.

A possible reason for the problem was the low morale of the officers themselves. The increasing use of reserve officers was introducing into command positions men who were not well off financially and found it burdensome to try to support a family on their military salary. This was a new experience for the army to deal with. Although the Austro-Hungarian army had long encouraged middle class participation in the army and had not denied promotion to men merely because of their class origin, this war was the first time the monarchy had been forced to call extensive numbers of reserve officers into the field for extended periods of time. The army leadership

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had not particularly taken into account the fact that many of these reserve officers and their families would suffer financial hardship due to extended field service. These difficulties were compounded by the general suffering and famine caused by the blockade.

Officer morale was also not improved by the general dissatisfaction with the attack plan. The disgruntlement among the senior commanders had inevitably filtered down to the lower ranks. One effect of this unease was that a large number of officers had reported sick prior to and during the battle, thus relieving themselves not only of danger but of responsibility. Such actions, one report noted, were highly dangerous to the morale of the soldiers, who correctly divined the real nature of the illness. Such shirkers, it was suggested, should be dealt with harshly.  

Another report indicated that so many commanders were despondent over the impending battle that they entered the fray convinced that they would be defeated. It is not surprising that the thought produced the fact. Captain Kovařík recommended that all such officers be relieved of their command so that their pessimism would not demoralize their men any longer. The idea would have been excellent had Austria-Hungary possessed a reserve of trained and competent officers to draw upon. It did not.

Officer morale was also hindered by the typical irritations endemic to military life during a war. Good front line officers

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38 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1735, p. 7 (451).

rarely received the leave due them, despite their belief that there were enough officers holding down desk jobs to temporarily relieve them of duty. When they finally got leave, or at least a temporary respite from the front, they arrived at rear area camps only to find myriads of rear-echelon officers who had already preempted all of the luxuries and the best billets. Soldiers' homes were found in which soldiers were not welcome, and one group of six officers who asked for a night's lodging received "prepared officers' accommodations" consisting of a small, dirty room, furnished with three straw-filled sacks.40 Attempts to rectify such matters were normally fruitless because the guilty parties usually had the influence or means to sidetrack any positive action.

All of these officer problems were bound to manifest themselves in some manner or another, and one of the results appears to have been a lethargic acceptance of the status quo, which precluded any show of initiative during the battle. British officers at Asiago believed that the Austrian attack on the plateau would have been very successful if a single echelon of command had provided the necessary impetus.41

Colonel Lorx, an observer for the Armeoberkommando in the Tirol, concluded that leadership from the company level on down left much to be desired, but he indicated that this had been a perennial problem for the army. He did, however, defend the competence shown

40 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, pp. 22-23 (874-75).

41 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 218.
by officers at battalion and regimental levels. Another staff officer reported that commanders from battalion level on down showed "no independence, no initiative, and little influence over their men." He concluded rather sardonically, "what can be done about it?" A third man considering the same problem, Major Bauer, concluded that on the whole, reserve officers functioned adequately as company commanders but that staff officers posted to units from desk jobs in the hinterland were unable to win the confidence of the men.

An interesting aspect of the battle's aftermath was that the officers took the loss of the battle much harder than their men did. If the men did not feel "defeated" their leaders did. Many of them had considered the June Battles as a "rehabilitative battle" -- a test to prove that the empire's army could achieve victory on its own, without German help. When the offensive failed, the officers became "unnerved" and began doubting themselves and the empire. From this time on an insidious indecision began spreading through the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army--an indecision which would reach fruition in October, when each soldier had to decide where his loyalty lay and whom to obey.

Among the major problems which beset the Austro-Hungarian army

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42 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. 10 (380).

43 Ibid., p. (388).

44 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1759, pp. 9-12 (363-69).

45 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1735, p. 6 (450).
prior to the June Battles, one affected both the army's performance in the offensive and its morale for the remainder of the war; this was undernourishment. The Armeeoberkommando had planned to greatly increase the food rations for the soldiers in the month prior to the battle as well as to give the designated assault divisions at least a minimal period of rest. Most of these plans remained only on paper. 46 Not only were the rations not forthcoming, but during the last three nights before the assault even the storm battalions were engaged in transporting munitions. 47 There had been some hope of continuing the improved rationing during the battle or even increasing it in order to enhance the men's staying power, but like the other plans, this too remained a flight of fancy. Although rations had been held back for such a purpose, the plan broke down due to the inability to bring the food forward to the soldiers in the front lines—the ones who needed it most. 48

Commanders were quick to notice the effects of the undernourishment. An artillery brigade commander said that the physical condition of the troops was such that they were incapable of fighting a severe battle, much less exploiting any success afterwards. 49


47 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 43b/Sz, p. 2 (798).


49 Pengov, Wahrheit über die Piave Schlacht, p. 44. See also Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740, pp. 6-7 (515-16), for further information on the hesitancy of lower echelon commanders to attempt rash exploitation in view of the physical weakness of their men.
sentiments were amplified by a Kaiserschützen who commented that the undernourishment produced both physical and spiritual weakness. The 13th infantry regiment alone had 140 deserters in the two days prior to the battle, and other men told the Kaiserschützen that they intended to go over to the enemy as soon as they were put into the front line. Although these numbers appear to be exaggerated by front line rumors, they do indicate a weakening in resolve. The Austrians were not alone in this assessment. In August General Graziani was quoted as saying that the Austrians' "physical and morale state appeared very low."  

Insufficient rations for the army was merely a symptom of the fact that the Austro-Hungarian army was operating on a shoestring in the summer of 1918. If the Italian army has concluded that the Armeoberkommando had prepared the battle troops with "greatest detail, with particular attention to organization, training, and replacements," and "especial attention for the arming and clothing of the soldiers," it is because they were more interested in painting a glowing portrait of their own endeavors than in describing the situation accurately. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Italian General Staff described the June Battles as a "rational

50 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1809, 11th Army Command Operations No. 2604/5, p. 4 (527).
52 "Zum Jahrestag der Schlachten am Piave," p. 7.
operative plan" and stated "the greatest offensive was planned and prepared with colossal resources and every technical and moral aid in order to instill the secure trust in every officer and man." 53 On the more mundane level of reality, the picture was somewhat different.

Archduke Joseph had set the tone for the battle when he made his pleas to Waldstätten for food and munitions prior to the battle. Waldstätten's reply was simple: "If we don't have things, we can't give them to you." Waldstätten went on to explain that shortages in matériel and passive resistance on the part of a few people had led to a situation in which "circumstances are stronger than we are." 54 In actuality, a more likely description was that Austria-Hungary was weaker than circumstances. Shortages ranged from insufficient machine gun ammunition 55 and deficiencies in heavy artillery, large mortars, food, clothing, and underwear 56 to a lack of airplanes, anti-aircraft guns, and bridging equipment. 57 Needless to say, the men and officers charged with carrying out the offensive were not silent on the matter of shortages. A report from the 83rd regiment stated that "an attack with insufficient resources is bound to fail, costs unnecessary bloodshed, and is a great failure

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53 Ibid., p. 6.

54 Waldstätten to Archduke Joseph, June 1, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 577, Armeeoberkommando Operations Division, "Hofzug Stücke."


of leadership." Another young officer called the situation "absurd" since the attacking army had to be so sparing of munitions while the enemy ground down the monarchy's troops with seemingly inexhaustible expenditures of shells and bullets.  

Boroević had always been a pessimistic commander, but early in the June Battles he was urging that his successes be exploited. As soon as he was informed of the exact matériel circumstances of the empire he quickly recanted and urged retreat rather than exploitation. The relationship between the supply problem and the offensive was best summed up by Colonel Pitreich, chief of staff to Boroević, when he wrote, "it is well known that one can never be strong enough for an attack." It is an epitaph that should have been written on the tombstones of those who died in an offensive which the Armeeoberkommando knew had been inadequately prepared.

While there can be no question that the monarchy was woefully short of many of the basic necessities for waging the battle, another dimension was added to the problem by the manner in which the preparations were carried out. In the first place, the ill-planned arrival of new troops on the front before the completion of the supply build-up made it impossible for supply to catch up with demand. Next, a definite terminal date for the completion of operations was set and,

58 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1776, p. (190).
59 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 69.
60 Kiszling, "Die Durchbruchsschlachten an der italienischen Front," pp. 37-38.
despite some question as to the military necessity of that particular day, it was strictly adhered to. The situation in the hinterland and the increasing gap between the comparative strengths of the Entente forces and Austro-Hungarian forces in Italy had evidently convinced the Armeeoberkommando that it could not deviate from the June 15, 1918, terminal date. Since the reasons for this choice were not made known to most commanders, they could only believe that an arbitrary date had forced the hasty preparations.

Even the army group commanders were not informed about all the circumstances relevant to the choice of dates. They were merely told that supply considerations made the decision mandatory. The explanation must have rung false to them because they continued to insist that such speed was not vital. Field Marshal Conrad complained that the preparations were "overhasty," and that transport shortages made it impossible to cling to a "firmly set termination date." Later he again referred to the "overhasty" preparations and transport failures that forced him to delay increasing the bread rations until June 10. Archduke Joseph also subscribed to the belief that the shortages in supply stemmed mainly from a failure to allow sufficient time for supplies to be built up and units rested. The same complaints were heard from lower command echelons. They grew tired of constant urgings of "quick, quick" and "the termination date must be met," which, in the view of their knowledge


of the circumstances, seemed incomprehensible. Most important, the strict time schedule meant that the assault and technical troops had no time to rest and recover from their exhausting transportation duties but had to go directly to the battlefield.

There is always a conflict between the political and military necessity to set a specific date for an operation and the need to allow sufficient time to complete preparations. In this case, the Armeeoberkommando was demanding a specific termination date based on a number of considerations which were not entirely obvious. Pressure from the Germans to accomplish something quickly in Italy and the specter of impending diminution in food and munitions were the two primary factors adduced by the Armeeoberkommando, but it is necessary to question the ultimate validity of this argument. It should also be remembered that the Armeeoberkommando had helped create its own dilemma by delaying so long in arriving at a plan of attack and then failing to keep a firm grip on the expanding expectations of its subordinate commanders.

Krauß, the apostle of supply considerations, had warned incessantly about the difficulties inherent in attempting a rapid accumulation of supplies in the proposed attack areas. The Armeeoberkommando had ignored its Cassandra and authorized preparations in several sectors, all the while bewailing the impossibility of meeting such a commitment. They not only stretched the empire's

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65 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, pp. 1-3 (365 and 369).
66 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740/III, p. 10 (525).
resources but also its transport system past all limits. Even if and when supplies were available at railheads, there was no assurance that these items would arrive at the front. Without carriers, the combat troops had to do double duty.67

In a sense, the concern over the supply situation was, if not an outright chimera, at least an artificial issue. Given the fact that the Armeeoberkommando had blundered in assigning troop shipments priority over supply shipments, the Austro-Hungarian army in Italy was placed in one of two possible circumstances. Either supply expenditure was exceeding supply accumulation, in which case the offensive should have been postponed or canceled, or, despite the unfavorable circumstances, food and munitions were being augmented. In the latter case, a delay of one to two weeks in the offensive would appear to be sensible and justified; however, other factors seem to have been at work. A major consideration must have been that the Armeeoberkommando had made some firm commitments to the German High Command which they were not ready to reveal. The surprise phone call to Pflug during the June Battles seems to corroborate this and indicates that the problem facing the army was not just a question of supply.

In either case, the Armeeoberkommando’s concept of the attack requires further discussion. If the Armeeoberkommando was correct and the empire did not possess sufficient munitions for a major battle, then the plan for the June campaign which they had accepted was incredibly irrational. Even under normal circumstances, the

plan was not a stellar example of military acumen. Archduke Joseph called the whole idea "absurd." General von Cramon described the extension of the front necessary for the execution of the plan as contrary to all the experience of the war because it left no acceptable superiority of force at any point in the line. The British official history of the war described the plan as strategically "excellent, but the conception of an 'armchair' strategist; for the Austrians had neither the material means, nor the numbers to carry it out with any chance of success." In its individual parts, the attack plan appeared sound. Major General Goiginger, who was writing from the experience of a partial success, commented: "First of all, it is asked, was this offensive really justifiable and necessary, and did it have any chance of success without the cooperation of German troops? This part of the question can only be answered by the expert with 'yes.'"

The Jansa report to the Armeoberkommando stated the problem succinctly:

An attack on a strong, unshaken enemy, who is richly supplied with all manner of war materiel, and who has for a month expected and awaited the attack in a sound and highly improved defensive system behind a mighty torrential river, is really one of the most difficult types of fighting.

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70. Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations. Italy, p. 192.
Nevertheless, Regele has judged that a "strong, well-prepared attack across the Piave in the sector between Zenson and S. Dona di Piave could certainly have succeeded." 73 And Regele was obviously correct, because in the suggested area and at the Montello two attacks that were intended as secondary operations nearly succeeded.

Goiginger agrees with Regele that success was possible on the Piave and also on the mountain front, but only if properly prepared and determinedly carried out, full-scale attacks were made. Not only was the whole conception wrong, the XXIV corps commander argued, but each of the parts had its own flaws. The mountain attack should not have been made against the English and French divisions, and the Piave attack should have begun under the cover of darkness. 74 Conred was, of course, completely convinced the mountain offensive was feasible.

Even if the individual aspects of the battle plan were partially valid, the total concept was not. One of the secret operations reports stated the case very concisely. The initial Armeeoberkommando operations plan, authored by Schilhawski, called for an attack down both banks of the Brenta with a mere demonstration by Boroević; this was a simple and direct task. Conrad then intervened and advanced his own "pet idea," and despite Waldstätten's objections, convinced the emperor to give priority to an offensive on the Asiago Plateau. Boroević then broadened his attack plan far too much and the 6th army insisted on attacking the Montello. After all of this,

73 Regele, Kampf um Flüsse, p. 73.

74 Goiginger, "Die Piaveforcierung," pp. 3-5.
the addition of the Tonale action was merely incidental. After making a flat observation that attacks through forest zones were not possible, the report concluded:

The guilt for all of this lies in the rigid insistence of Field Marshal Conrad on his plan, in the aspiration of the 6th Army that it should also participate in the attack, and in the broad attack frontage of the Isonzo army.

The indiscipline of the higher commanders is to be blamed. 75

The author of the report was only partly correct. He was cleaving to the Armeoberkommando line that it had been blameless and that the stubbornness and pride of the army and army group commanders had led to the defeat. It made a good story but it ignored the basic fact that the Armeoberkommando had the right at any time to have said "no."

In placing initial blame on Conrad, the above report initiated the trend for most historical judgements and set the stage for Conrad's dismissal. What the author of the report did not seem to realize was that by proposing the higher commanders as scapegoats, he was merely directing attention to the shortcomings of the Armeoberkommando. It was this body of men who had the final responsibility for all decisions. A direct order from either Arz or the emperor would have forestalled the "indiscipline" at any time—but to make this statement would have involved either criticism of the officer's direct superior or lèse-majesté, and staff officers are trained to seek the better part of valor.

It was becoming obvious to the Armeoberkommando that something had to be done, since report after report indicated a growing

75 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, pp. (385-87).
distrust of, dissatisfaction with, and disbelief in, the competence of the army leadership. An unknown artillery officer stated that the opinion was widespread that the failure of the offensive was to be ascribed "solely and alone" to the leadership. A division reported "our splendid troops will become uneasy if they no longer have the fullest trust that the higher leadership will protect them from unnecessary casualties, and they will react accordingly." An Armeeoberkommando reporting officer prefaced his statement with the comment that it was clear that the troops no longer had trust in the "highest and higher leadership."

The most telling complaints were those concerning the competence of the planners. Officers repeatedly lambasted those responsible for the preparations and troop deployments for violating the instructions set forth in Battle Instructions, Part 12. A most biting comment was that the division of command which had been ordered was impossible to execute. The instructions for the advance created a situation in which only "general staff chiefs and cadets" were in a position to expedite the movement of supplies forward and the commitment of reserves; unfortunately, the report concluded, neither group "could be trusted to fulfill these obligations."

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77 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1734, p. 3 (369).
78 Ibid., Armeeoberkommando Vb. No. 110, p. 2 (370).
79 Ibid., p. 3 (369).
80 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1740, p. 10 (517).
Another factor contributing to the disaster was that, although a large number of the officers in field commands were skeptical about both the plans and preparations for the battle, they neither protested nor complained. When questioned about the reasons for their silence, they stated that they felt that their remarks would not be listened to or acted upon, and that any protests might result in their being identified as defeatists or troublemakers in the eyes of their superiors. 81

Utopians might have believed that all of these investigatory reports could lead to meaningful and substantive improvements in the Austro-Hungarian army. The main result of the reports, however, was that they became ammunition in a war of words and finger-pointing. It now became obvious that the emperor and Armeeoberkommando’s version of doing something to alleviate the problems within the army consisted of finding a scapegoat. The Armeeoberkommando was happy to find that the army commanders had been at fault, and many commanders were equally certain that the Armeeoberkommando was responsible for the fiasco. 82 While the 6th army complained that it was simultaneously being given expanded responsibilities and being weakened, Waldstätten could point to the fact that he was on record as having never been in favor of their participation in the battle.

In the meantime, Boroević took every opportunity to mention that he

81 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1757; Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 43b/Sz, p. 7 (1922).

82 See Krauß, Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage, p. 251, and Archduke Joseph, The Italian Victory on the Piave, p. 9, for examples.
had objected to the idea of an offensive all along. The reading is not edifying.

An ever-widening gap began to open between the front line commanders and the general staff during late June and early July. The problem was that the Armeecoberkommando was at fault in the whole situation concerning the offensive. In private Arz and others had the good grace to admit their mistakes and responsibility. The hidden boomerang in the matter was the emperor. By taking over supreme command of the army and appointing his own chief of staff, Charles had identified himself with the high command. To criticize the Armeecoberkommando, therefore, was to criticize the emperor, both directly and indirectly. This was an impossible state of affairs and there was no way for the Armeecoberkommando to resolve the situation and shoulder the blame without the resignation of Arz and the admission that the emperor had made a mistake. A scapegoat had to be found elsewhere and as a result, Conrad was relieved of his command on July 15, 1918.

In the command shuffle, Archduke Joseph was given Conrad's army group in the Tirol, a fine corps commander, Prince Schönburg, was given command of the 6th army, and one of Conrad's initial requests, dating back to March, was carried out: Army Group Belluno was formed out of the 11th army's units between the Brenta and Piave.

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\(^{83}\) Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, pp. 7-19, contains much of this correspondence.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., Pt. II, p. 104.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., Pt. III, p. 6.
As a whole, however, the army leadership was still unhappy since it felt that Arz should take his share of the blame along with Conrad. Speculation was rife that the dismissal of the chief of staff was imminent, and that either Krauß, Boroević, or Field Marshal Böhm-Ermolli would replace him. Böhm-Ermolli went so far as to visit the Italian front, though ostensibly for other reasons.86

Everything reached a climax on August 9, 1918, when Prince Schönburg approached Arz and the emperor as a representative of the field army leadership, and informed them that the Austro-Hungarian army no longer had faith in Arz's leadership. Arz realized the shakiness of his position and repeated an earlier offer to resign. Charles, however, became exceedingly angry, accused Schönburg of insubordination and demanded that he resign his command. The emperor was dissuaded from following through on this by Boroević, who realized that Schönburg was only a spokesman. The emperor still " lamented bitterly over his disgruntled household."87 The epitaph for this episode was written by General Bardolff, who noted that:

the obedient Arz remained in his post although he did not want to remain, although the army had no trust in him, and although he was certainly not adequate for hard times; he remained because the emperor was too weak to reach a conclusion.88

With Conrad's departure an era had come to an end. In his years as chief of staff, Conrad had impressed his personality and character on the Austro-Hungarian army. In a true sense, it was his

86Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, p. 320.
army, since he had attempted to modernize it and mold it during the prewar years. It was partly this preeminence that brought him to disaster. In order to satisfy the public and parliament's anger over the defeat of the empire's army, a highly placed and highly visible head had to roll. In parliament a speaker had invoked the bloodletting and suffering of the soldiers during the battle and denounced their leaders, declaring "it is not the bolsheviks but the gentlemen officers who are preparing revolution in the army." His speech was greeted with stormy applause. Since Conrad's prewar battles with parliament had, of course, endeared him to few of its members, he was unlikely to find staunch defenders there.

Conrad's ouster served other ends. Most important, it could be rationalized if not justified. Conrad had been a real driving force behind the planning for the offensive, urging that it be carried out, preferably according to his plans. He was abrasive and imperious and assumed that only he had the correct evaluations of the strategic situation. Very likely his newly subordinate position as an army group commander in the Tirol did not sit well with him and accentuated his already undiplomatic nature. After all of his prodding, Conrad's attack in the Tirol achieved no lasting success. The dismissal of an unsuccessful field marshal gave the appearance of cleaning house in response to a failure, and allowed

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90 Cramon, Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse, p. 171.
the emperor and the Armeoberkommando to rid themselves of a gadfly with whom they could not cope. From a practical point of view, they probably made the correct decision even if the motives were suspect (of course it was a decision they probably should have made long before the offensive). In the final analysis, however, Conrad was not responsible for the offensive, and attempts to cast him in this role ignore the reality of the situation.

Several points are evident from the discussion of the "pros" and "cons" of the planning for the June Battle. Conrad did steadily pursue his obsession with an attack in the Seven Communities area, but to portray him as the ultimate progenitor of defeat for doing this is patently absurd.91 First, as an army group commander, he could urge offensive action, but his was not the final decision. The fact is that Charles, Arz, Waldstätten, and the Armeoberkommando all agreed to pursue the offensive. Whether Conrad "bullied" any or all of them is beside the point. If he did, it was merely an appalling reflection on their characters and capabilities. Second, the final plan for the battle scarcely resembled Conrad's original concept. His Trentino offensive was retained, but the numerous subsidiary actions were purely the work of others who had neither the courage to rebuke him nor to accede to his theory. Third, the failure of his army group's attack cannot be ascribed solely to his planning or actions because the men and supplies necessary to carry out his plan were doled out to him by the Armeoberkommando.

91 Петер Филя is probably the leading exponent of the modern "Conrad as éminence grise" school. Although I agree with Dr. Fiala on many matters, I believe he is mistaken concerning Conrad.
and neither was in the quantity necessary for success. Conrad's plan may have been faulty, but he was never given the means to carry it out. As for the repeated assertions by Armeeoberkommando officers that an army cannot attack in a wooded zone, the less such pronunciamentos are examined, the better.

The purpose of this analysis is not to make a judgement or reach a final conclusion as to whether Conrad was "right" or "wrong" but only to point out that he was made a scapegoat for circumstances over which he had no control or even final responsibility. The "culprit" or "culprits," if they existed, lay higher in the chain of command. The much-abused Conrad may have been wrong or misguided, but he was not the ultimate "reason" for the failure of the June Battles.

There is little doubt that the army felt that Arz should be blamed for the defeat. The chief of staff, to his credit, was willing to accept the responsibility and resign. Charles, however, had a pliable chief of staff and he was not going to replace him with another man who might be an unknown factor. The emperor would rather lose the war in his own way than do this, and so he decided to reject Arz's resignation.

Offering Conrad as a sacrificial lamb may have provided a catharsis for Charles and the Armeeoberkommando, but it solved no basic problems. The monarchy needed a great victory in June, and now that the goddess had eloped in the night, the Austrians could do nothing but hold on and wait, hoping for a miracle before winter. The miracle was not to come to pass, and the lack of strong

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92 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 273 and 278.
leadership in the Armeeoberkommando was yet to perpetrate another blunder and sacrifice even more lives before the war mercifully ended.
CHAPTER VIII

NOBODY LOVES YOU
WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT

June had not been a propitious month for the Austro-Hungarian army, but the next few months were not going to be any improvement. The most surprising factor during the weeks immediately after the conclusion of the June Battles was that the army continued to demonstrate a rather amazing resilience—a feature which characterized it throughout the First World War.¹ The army's vitality was being stretched, however, by the new demands being placed on it by both internal pressures and external demands. A breaking point was bound to occur.

Germany's insistence on acquiring Austrian soldiers for direct employment on the Western Front began to increase as soon as it became apparent that the June Battles were not going to accomplish any of the long-range goals expected from them by the Central Powers. Already on June 22, 1918, the German High Command began chivvying the Austrians to definitely commit themselves to a date for the transfer of Austro-Hungarian troops to France. Arz could delay the

Germans only so long, but he did manage to deflect their demands for a short time by pointing out that such discussions were worse than fruitless at such an awkward moment, i. e., in the midst of a battle.\(^2\)

The Armeeoberkommando really had no choice but to accede to the German request eventually, and immediately after the conclusion of the June Battles it designated a full corps for transfer to the Western Front. The 1st and 35th divisions arrived in France in time to participate in the defense of St. Mihiel. Their performance during their first battle on the Western Front was adequate, if not spectacular. Shortly thereafter, the 37th Honvéd and 108th divisions arrived, bringing the corps to full strength.\(^3\) The Austrian soldiers arriving in France, full of confidence in the invincibility and strength of the German army, received a rude awakening when they were met by jeers from German troops, shouting "Kriegsverlängerer" at them.\(^4\) Morale in the German army was no higher than among the Austro-Hungarian troops.

For the majority of the Austrian soldiers remaining in Italy, the future held only the promise of more defensive battles—a return

\(^2\)Arz to Waldstätten, June 23, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1718, p. (172).


\(^4\)Feldl, Das verspielte Reich, p. 262. "Kriegsverlängerer" is one of those marvelous German epithets that have no precise English equivalent. "War proloner" is a direct translation, but the word also has some of the connotations of "scab" or strikebreaker. The implications were obvious: the German soldiers believed that the arrival of Austrian troops indicated a prolonged campaign.
to the war of attrition they had known along the Isonzo. It is true that there was some discussion of another offensive, but few officers could take such talk seriously. Early in July Waldstätten visited Baden and spoke of a renewed offensive between the Brenta and Piave, to be carried out by approximately thirty divisions at some time in the late autumn.\(^5\) How serious Waldstätten was about this plan is questionable, though initial preparatory steps were taken. The 11th army received orders on July 12 for its XXVII corps to begin the groundwork for such an attack, which was issued the code name "Hildebrand."\(^6\) It is difficult to believe that the operations chief ever considered the plan to be more than a morale-boosting measure to convince the soldiers that all was not yet lost. There is some evidence that the latter explanation is correct,\(^7\) and, considering that the Montello had been abandoned, it was just as well that the offensive plan remained a pipe dream.

There was one other piece of evidence that the Armeeoberkommando had decided that no further offensive action was contemplated, regardless of its public statements. Following normal procedures, a secret operations report was circulated to higher commanders, discussing the German experiences and lessons of the great summer offensive. As opposed to most earlier reports, this missive concentrated entirely on the battle's defensive lessons.\(^8\)


\(^6\) Entry for July 12, 1918 in Eleventh Army Command Diary, Vol. VIII, Operations No. 2900, p. 3,099.

\(^7\) Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piaveschlacht," Pt. III, p. 33.

\(^8\) Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1855.
In the period since the end of the June Battles, the physical and morale state of the troops had become so poor that a resumption of offensive operations was completely excluded in any case. The exertions of the soldiers, coming in the wake of a prolonged period of malnutrition, made the men more susceptible to disease than was normal. In some of the regiments, the undernourishment was compounded by rampant epidemics of the Spanish influenza that were beginning to claim lives throughout the world, and those men who escaped the flu were overwhelmed by the onslaught of mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria. Sickness and starvation worked double jeopardy on the men. One unit reported that the average weight of its men had been reduced to 110 pounds. 9 Rations sank below the pittance level of the spring. On many days the men had no meat and no grain, subsisting mainly on dried vegetables. Some units entered the front lines without orders, merely to get the slightly higher rations issued to front troops. 10

A comparison of battle casualties with losses due to illness is a useful gauge for determining the physical and morale state of the men. During the first week in July the Italians launched a series of counterattacks, hoping to retake the last of the ground that they had lost during June and if possible to break the spirit of the recently repulsed Austro-Hungarian army. The fighting was


fierce, as is indicated by the following entries in the 11th army war diary:

July 2, 1918: "Due to overpowering enemy attack, our own troops were driven back from Col d'Anna into the old positions."

July 4, 1918: "Powerful enemy attack against Mt. Tomba has shattered on the brave defense of the infantry and artillery."

July 6, 1918: "Enemy attack east of Mt. Pertica repulsed."

July 7, 1918: "Five enemy attacks on Tassonrücken east of Mt. Pertica repulsed in heavy fighting."

In the midst of this fighting, Army Group Conrad announced its July 3 casualties as 663 dead and wounded from combat and 1,144 casualties due to illness. On July 6 the losses were 293 dead and wounded in combat and 831 men and officers reported sick. Disease and ill health were claiming between two and three times as many casualties as was the enemy, and there was much truth in the assertion by General Graziani that the Austrian army "is tired of the war, and like its nation, it aspires to peace at any price."

Italian propagandists jumped at the chance to exploit the perceived faltering in the Austro-Hungarian ranks. Propaganda leaflets

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12 Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando, July 4, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 61, Army Group Command Conrad Enemy Intelligence Group, Operations No. 31.4000.

13 Army Group Command Conrad to Armeeoberkommando, July 7, 1918, ibid., Operations No. 31.9000/22.

showered into the Austro-Hungarian lines. They contained reports of the imperial and royal army's "terrible losses," and one dated a report from Zürich on June 23, 1918, which stated that "revolution has broken out in Austria-Hungary."\(^{15}\)

These leaflets evidently caused serious concern among the men and officers of the 11th army, because only a few days later the army headquarters circulated an order to its units stating that the report that revolution had broken out was entirely without foundation, and that, furthermore, rumors that Army Group Boroević\(^{16}\) had been withdrawn from the front to suppress the rebellion were utterly false. The units were urged to combat these "biased lies" in all possible ways.\(^{17}\)

Austrian morale was also damaged by the resurfacing of the rumors that the empress was again showing more concern for the Italian casualties after the June Battles than for her own subjects.\(^ {18}\) Even if her supposed acts consisted of more rumor than truth, it was a bitter pill for the average soldier to swallow.

While the Austrian commanders were showing concern over their

\(^{15}\)"Soldaten des oesterreich-ungarischen Heeres," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 451, 11th Army Command Propaganda Leaflets.

\(^{16}\)Was it genius or coincidence that the Italians picked Boroević's army group as the weapon of suppression? Most Austro-Hungarians would automatically associate the "Croatian thickhead" with the Josip Jelačić of an earlier revolt.

\(^{17}\)Eleventh Army Command to Corps Commanders, June 26, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 449, Eleventh Army Command Propaganda Group, Fr. No. 2295/Res.

\(^{18}\)Gallian, Der österreichische Soldat im Weltkrieg, pp. 45-46. So far as can be discovered, the sources of this particular charge were some newspaper reports that the empress visited Italian wounded in a hospital. This was a perfectly harmless propaganda visit similar to those of royalty in other lands.
own soldiers, a number of their intelligence reports were indicating that the Italians might be facing similar problems. An early after-action report on the Montello fighting implied to the Austrians that although many of the Italian soldiers showed bravery in their counterattacks, their high losses showed a diminished skill in tactics, and the large number of Italians taken prisoner by the defenders in the last days of the battle was a definite sign of lowered morale. On the other hand, the report warned that the artillerymen and fliers showed both skill and excellent spirit. 19 Similar testimony was given in a XV corps report. 20

From the Austrian point of view, the most unfortunate side effect of the offensive having gone awry was that the Italian army regained the self-confidence that it had lost at Caporetto. Growing strain had been manifested among the members of the Entente, with the English and French soldiers speaking slightingly of the Italian army and referring to its troops as "inferior." The Italian soldier, on the other hand, was apt to refer to the English, French, and especially the American soldiers as "war prolongers." 21 For their part, the new American contingent on the Italian front was dubious about the fighting ability of its Italian ally. Major General Eben Swift, Pershing's representative in Italy, informed his commander

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19 Sixth Army Command to 11th Army Command, June 25, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 446, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group, 6th Army Command Operations No. 832/Ev-42, in 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 1074.

20 XV Corps to 11th Army Command, July 9, 1918, ibid., 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 1177.

21 "Monatsbericht," ibid., 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 1280, n. d.
that he had learned from the British that "the Italians so far have not qualified as satisfactory." 22

If it had not been obvious before, it became clear in July that the tide had turned against the Central Powers. The French High Command estimated on July 5 that Austria had only 916,000 fighting men and 6,000 artillery pieces on the Southwest front; facing them was a growing Entente army now estimated at 1,449,000 men and 6,988 artillery pieces. 23 During the same month a Hungarian general concluded in a report on the monarchy's army that "the present young officer corps can bravely die in battle, but they cannot lead with cool-headed intelligence or train and educate the men." 24 On the same day this requiem for the Austrian officer corps was delivered, the first American soldiers, the 332nd infantry regiment, arrived at billeting areas in Italy. 25

No better news could be reported from other battle fronts. In Albania the Italians had launched a massive offensive against the twenty-four battalions of Honvéd and Landsturm troops holding the line. A penetration of ten miles deep and sixty miles wide netted them 2,000 Austrian prisoners and six aircraft, along with twenty-four artillery pieces. 26 Though a counterattack would regain much

22 Swift to Pershing, July 1, 1918, in The United States Army in the World War, Vol. VI, p. 529.


25 Treat to Pershing, July 30, 1918, in The United States Army in the World War, Vol. VI, p. 534.

of the lost ground, the blow presaged the difficulties of autumn. To make matters worse, it was now also apparent that the Germans were not going to win the war in France. Despair was settling over the Austro-Hungarian army, and the feeling was growing that "it is all coming to an end."\footnote{Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, p. 1.}

With the growing pessimism as to the outcome of the war, the national antagonisms that had long been wracking the inner monarchy began to fester among the combat troops. The mistrust, prejudice, and accusations, which had been long held in abeyance at the front, now came to the fore. The Isonzo army reported that Hungarian units were blaming their Czech-Polish artillery brigade for "shorts," accusing them of deliberately shooting into the infantry position. A Czech-Polish infantry division made the same accusation against a Honvéd battery:

\begin{quote}
The strong unity of the army, the excellent and conscientious officers' corps, is no more. What is on the front is the people in its purest form. All reserve officers and the men give a political character to things with economic and nationalist perspectives.

\ldots The army still does its duty. Things must, however, get worse and worse.\footnote{Ibid., Pt. III, pp. 34-35.}
\end{quote}

During July, despair, disease, and dejection had been an ever-present factor, but in August they became even more poignant. Disease, in particular, was destroying what was left of the imperial and royal army. In the coastal regions and along the lower course of the Piave, malaria was the primary danger. The 14th, 57th, and 58th infantry divisions, along with a number of coastal defense
units, were completely put out of action by malaria-bearing mos-quitoes, and Boroević's army group was reporting 700 new cases of malaria every day. In view of the soldiers' previously weakened state, they had few physical defenses against the illness, and the malarial fever effectively removed men from combat for the remainder of the war.

In the mountains there was no threat from the mosquito, but the numbing cold of the nights combined with the physical weakness of the malnourished men, and provided a dangerous breeding ground for several flu viruses. By mid-August the combat units were mere skeletons of their theoretical tables of organization. One company was left with only one officer, and he had to take the unit up to the front for its tour of combat while suffering from a 105° fever.

Of the fifteen divisions in the Isonzo army at the beginning of September, seven had less than one-third of their designated rifle strength; three of the divisions were barely above half of their strength, and only five of the divisions had more than two-thirds of their complement of men. For the Italian front as a whole, as of August 1, 1918, the 649 infantry battalions could muster a total strength of only 504,700 men. This was less than 780

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30 Biedermann, *Vom Isonzo zur Piave*, p. 205. The Allied blockade had aggravated the problem by cutting off most of the supply of quinine.

31 Gallian, *Monte Asalino*, p. 83. See also p. 87.


33 Hecht, *"Fragen zur Heeresergänzung,“* p. 591.
men per battalion instead of the 1,200 that such a unit would normally carry on its roster.

These shortages in men were most often felt in the rifle companies. There was an understandable desire on the part of commanders to siphon off all of the best replacements for employment in the specialized units such as the machine gun detachments, storm companies, or mortar squads. The rifle companies then got whomever was left over—the worst of the lot. Yet it was these same rifle units that were expected to bear the brunt of any defensive fighting.\(^{34}\)

Any lack in manpower could not be compensated for by the use of matériel. It, too, was not available in sufficient quantity. Artillery "communications officers" were attached to infantry regiments with no telephones and no other methods of communication with their parent batteries.\(^{35}\) Artillery ammunition production within the empire had fallen so drastically that replacement shells averaged less than four per gun per day.\(^{36}\) The shells that did arrive were the products of a failing war machine which could not any longer achieve even rudimentary quality control. Although Austrian and Italian lines were sometimes separated by a distance of thirty paces or less, the Austrian artillery shells now had an accuracy factor of plus or minus 200 yards. An artillery battery that wished to be certain of not causing any casualties among its own infantry due to shorts had to fire at least 200 yards beyond the intended target.

\(^{34}\) Gallian, *Monte Asaione*, p. 81.


\(^{36}\) Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, p. 54.
The result, of course, was that many of the shells would land up to 400 yards behind the Italian front lines. The effectiveness of such artillery support could only range from minimal to futile.

Effect of the deprivations in food and clothing on the ordinary soldier was predictable. Loss of hope became the most dangerous enemy—more insidious than death in battle—and suicides began to increase. One young soldier, twice wounded during the war, was found dead in a vegetable field. His diary, day after day for nearly two weeks, contained only the statement, "I cannot live like this any longer."

There was no further hope of military victory in Italy, even on the part of confirmed optimists. Now that even the "proud German army leaders" had been reduced to begging for heretofore despised Austrian units to be sent to the Western Front, both soldier and emperor began to believe that Germany was also doomed. A final blow was the appearance of a new enemy on the Southwestern front. The latest Austrian intelligence reports indicated that two to three American infantry divisions had landed in Italy—a force assumed to

37 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 91.

38 Rumor—always a problem in any army—could also serve to increase despair. General Berndt, in his Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision, Meine Erinnerungen aus der Zeit des Zusam-
menbruchs (Reichenberg: Verlag der "Heimatsöhne im Weltkrieg," 1928), p. 21, reported the prevalent rumor that the war ministry was really well-supplied with clothing but was saving it to clothe the postwar army. Such rumors were difficult to disprove.

39 Bergmann, Am Niemandslande, p. 288.

40 Gallian, Monte Asalone, pp. 79-80. See also Landwehr, Hunger, p. 248; and Glaize-Horstenau, Collapse of the Austro-
Hungarian Monarchy, p. 237.
be approximately 40,000 to 60,000 men. The fact that the American contingent amounted to only a single regiment would have been cold comfort to the beleaguered Austro-Hungarian army.

Even if the German High Command was still trying to exhibit a degree of sang-froid, the full seriousness of the situation was clear to the Armeeoberkommando. In mid-August, the emperor and Arz made another pilgrimage to Spa for consultations with William, Hindenburg, and Ludendorff. Arz gave his evaluation of conditions on the Italian front and concluded that a major or even moderately scaled offensive was clearly impossible and that even a line straightening operation was only a marginal possibility. He used this narration as the prelude to what he really came to the conference to say: "It is our conclusion that the Central Powers are no longer in a position to strike the enemy so decisive a blow as to allow us to dictate peace." The balance of power, he stated, was moving rapidly in favor of the Entente. If the Germans, however, believed that the situation was other than he had outlined, they should act immediately.

It probably came as a surprise to Arz that both of the German generals concurred completely with his general thesis. They agreed that no decisive victory was possible at this juncture, but at the

41"Monatsbericht," Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 477, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeeoberkommando Operations No. 766/328, September 10, 1918, in 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence No. 1594, September 14, 1918.

same time they argued that the circumstances of the moment were not propitious for negotiations. First, the Germans felt that they must conduct "local" retreats to "shorten" the front.\textsuperscript{43} From this greater security, the Central Powers could then proceed to bargain with a greater hope of success.

Arz evidently accepted their statement for the time being, and next raised the question of where the war was to lead, especially with regard to the problem of keeping order in the homelands. Hindenburg, also worried about revolution and bolshevism, responded that the German High Command was concerned about the problem, but offered no solutions. The German field marshal next stated baldly that peace negotiations were imperative, though they should be carried out through a neutral country rather than openly. Ludendorff then added that "the German High Command has the intention of approaching the peace question, although not immediately. The beginning of autumn has come into consideration as the point in time." He concluded: "The status quo ante should be declared as the foundation [for negotiations]. It will give an indication of what is possible."\textsuperscript{44} It is evident from this that the Germans expected not only to lose their war gains but also some of the prewar territory. There seemed to be no great disagreement between the two parties about the necessity of concluding a peace, other than the Austrian presentiment that peace was more urgent than the Germans assumed.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. (790).

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., pp. 790-91). Ludendorff, My War Memories, 1914-1918, predictably, gives a more blame and self-satisfied version of the views presented by himself and Hindenburg. See pp. 579-602.
Charles and William had arrived at the same agreement as their generals: peace was vital before winter. At this point, for better or worse, the Central Powers had tacitly conceded that they would not win the war and had agreed that further military operations, of necessity, would be purely defensive in nature. To reach this conclusion did not, however, solve the problem of how and when to end the war. It was also clear that the Austrians were more anxious than the Germans to get the war over with; the Germans simply did not realize the dire straits their ally was in. 45 Until some settlement was reached, or necessity, in the form of the Entente armies, forced a conclusion, the war would continue.

Shortly after Arz and Charles had returned from the Spa conference, Waldstätten traveled to Belluno, and on August 21, 1918, he conducted a meeting of the chiefs of staff of all the army and army group headquarters in Italy. He gave the assembled officers a frank and complete picture of the state of affairs in the homeland and of the prospects facing the Central Powers. After a bitter diatribe in which Waldstätten castigated the "undermining influence of the press" and the helplessness of the emperor, the censors, and the Armeeoberkommando in dealing with the press, Waldstätten arrived at the crux of the speech: the helplessness of the monarchy. 46

45 Few events are more indicative of this German blindness than the fact that on October 23, 1918, with portions of the Austro-Hungarian army in outright revolt, and an Entente offensive scheduled to begin the next day, Ludendorff requested the Austrians to send several brigades of mountain troops to the Western Front. See Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Kriegs, p. 328.

Major General Baron Willerding, as the most senior officer present, posed the question which many of them felt was the most pressing. "Why," he asked, "under such circumstances, has not the chief of the general staff, who carries a certain political answerability, not accepted the consequences?" Waldstätten attempted to explain that Arz had been willing to admit partial responsibility for the state of affairs and had offered his resignation. None of the officers present were willing to accept this explanation. Instead, they insisted that if the situation in the homeland had degenerated into a condition where the government was completely helpless, the chief of staff had the duty to resign, whether or not the emperor wished it. Each of his successors had the same duty until the emperor was brought to the realization that the government could not continue in the manner that it had. On this note, the meeting broke up.

Waldstätten had been put into a very touchy situation. It was obvious that the most influential group of officers in the Austro-Hungarian army were unanimous in believing that their chief of staff was incapable of carrying out his duties properly and should resign. Implicit in this was a criticism of the manner in which Emperor Charles was conducting the affairs of government—a situation of lese-majesty that would have been unthinkable only a few months before. It was a situation that could not be easily dealt with, and Waldstätten apparently handled it like he would any similar matter. He tried to smooth things over and ignore the rift. Nothing was

\[^{47}\text{Ibid.}, p. 43.\]
done, and the Austro-Hungarian empire and army continued to slide into apathy and defeat.

The true helplessness of the Dual Monarchy was reflected in what was becoming the dissolution of its army in Italy. Despite the fact that the army and civilian authorities had attempted to put a cordon between the army and the homeland, revolutionary and nationalist ideas and propaganda reached the front lines in growing quantities, increasing the already existing misery and despair of the men. Desertions and absences without leave had increased the number of "green cadres" of deserters roaming behind the front lines. The size of the "green cadres" was rumored to have increased from approximately 30,000 men during the spring to perhaps as many as 100,000 men in the early fall.

Those deserters who did not wish to take the chance of being caught and hanged in the rear areas merely had to cross the lines and be taken prisoner. Many soldiers, suffering from starvation, were willing to do this merely to eat better. Italian propaganda played constantly on the theme of how well prisoners were fed in their camps, and, as one Austrian intelligence officer put it, "only a well-filled stomach can resist it."

Again, the long term results of this deprivation were predictable. Among the soldiers who refused to desert was a growing


49 Ibid., p. 597. See also Berndt, Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision, p. 34.

50 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 447, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 1346, August, 1918.
"foxhole bolshevism," which had little to do with politics or social class and was in reality only an expression of contempt and hatred for all those "who had it better." In this disillusionment and bitterness were the seeds of the extremist movements of the postwar period. As yet inarticulate, these "foxhole bolshevists" became the communist and fascist street fighters of the future. The feeling was not limited to the foxholes. At this time Admiral Miklós Horthy declared the fleet "incapable of battle," after another sailors' strike.

By September 20, 1918, what had seemed impossibly bad had gotten worse. As Arz stated in a note to Hindenburg, the entire Austro-Hungarian army on the Italian front could only muster a total rifle strength of 280,000 men. The reasons for this appallingly low number of effectives were simple. They amounted to merely an extension of the earlier litany of woe: food, clothing, or lack of them, and illness.

In late September, Lt. Colonel Slavko Kvaternik was assigned to report on the morale among the troops of the 6th army. The

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51 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 96.


53 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 298. Another source states that on the average each infantry battalion lacked 350 men and others had "the strength of only four to six companies." Mecht, "Fragen zur Heeresergänzung," pp. 599-600. See also Gallian, Monte Asalone, pp. 114-15 and 132. Gallian states that some units were even worse off and company strengths of thirteen to twenty-five men were not uncommon. Even when units were reinforced, problems remained; Gallian's battalion had 288 riflemen, but 137 were green. Hoen, Geschichte des ehemaligen Obergärtner Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 73, p. 664, states that the 2nd battalion of the 92nd regiment was reduced to 331 rifles, twelve machine guns, and two infantry guns.
picture that emerged from his efforts was that of a group of men regressing rapidly from an army into a rabble. The distinguishing feature of an army, its uniform, hardly existed.

Every man possessed, on the average, one set of underwear. It was generally the case that no one had a full set of outerwear, either the shirt or the pants being missing...

In one front regiment, every third man lacks a coat, and I also encountered a unit in which, due to the lack of pieces of clothing, not a single man could advance. Only the footwear is generally satisfactory.

To give immediacy to his report, Kvaternik enclosed a posed picture of a group of soldiers he had met. Several are in only their underwear or are wearing makeshift leggings. Those shirts and pants that exist are in rags.

In the hospitals the sick and wounded lay naked in their beds because no bed clothes were to be had, and their own lice and disease-infested clothing had yet to be washed and sterilized; even then a night of malarial sweat would force the whole procedure to be repeated. In such rags the army had little self-respect left. "The lowest Bosnian was shamed to be seen in such a state by the enemy in our occupied areas." Another soldier from an impoverished area of Dalmatia told his colonel, "we are no heroes, just beggars."

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54 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1951, pp. 3-4 (700). Bergmann, in his Am Niemandslande, p. 393, gives a similar picture: "The clothing would provoke mockery if it had not been so tragic an episode as the starvation. The starving, undernourished foxhole dogs have shirts and pants hanging from them in tatters... Many of the soldiers have become tramps to all outward appearances."


56 Ibid., pp. 3-4 (700).

57 Ibid., p. 4 (700). See also Wißhaupt, Die 52. Landwehr-Infanteriebrigade, p. 447.
Even greater strains were placed on the men's weakened constitutions by the lack of proper clothing. More body heat was required just to stay warm, but this required an increased amount of nutrition which was not forthcoming. Nourishment was so bad, Kvaternik complained, that the soldiers could not undergo even routine military schooling. The physical deterioration, in turn, lowered resistance to disease. More men became ill, and the lack of manpower placed an even greater strain on the rifle companies in an unending circle of destruction. Most to be feared, Kvaternik added, was a "laming of the will," which would be catastrophic in the midst of a battle. 58

Signs of the "laming of the will" were becoming more and more evident. Desertions increased as some of the men decided that they could live better foraging in the woods. Bitterness reigned throughout the army about the stories of disorders in the hinterland and tales of speculators in the wine market. 59 The troops understood, of course, that the homeland was also suffering from privation, 60 but they were unable to comprehend the "business as usual" feeling that reigned among many civilians. The bureaucrats and rear echelon

58 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1951, p. 5 (701). See also Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 94, for his description of men attempting to cook with grenade powder just to get hot food and a little warmth. Coal and wood were often non-existent. Clothing problems are also discussed in Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, p. 573; and Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 65 Army Group Command Archduke Joseph Enemy Intelligence Group No. 42, 200/16.

59 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1951, pp. 5-6 (701). See also Gallian, Monte Asalone, pp. 101-02, which is especially bitter towards strikers.

60 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 100. See also Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, p. 332, which describes soldiers scrounging from friends and their own rations in order to take a little package of necessities home, to help out friends and relatives.
officers were perceived as the source of much of the suffering among the soldiers and were classified with the speculators as "blind and unpatriotic." 61 A Viennese joke reached the frontlines which seemed to symbolize the plight of the soldiers and served to exacerbate the already bitter frame of mind:

Asks a civilian: "Say, how long do you think the war will last?"

"That is hard to say. The real heroes have died long ago, the clever ones have gotten themselves exempted—and how long the fools that are still abroad can still fight, only God knows." 62

On the Ringstrasse it was funny; on the Piave it was not.

Kvaternik concluded his report with the observation that circumstances in the Austro-Hungarian army and in the homeland were now quite similar to the situation in Russia on the eve of revolution. Though he attempted to ameliorate this statement with an optimistic assessment of the loyalty and steadfastness of the army, it is obvious that Kvaternik's final enthusiasm was somehow forced. 63

In truth, morale was on the verge of total collapse. The ranks of the army were now filled with returned prisoners of war from

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61 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1951, p. 3 (700). Bardolff, Soldat im alten Österreich, pp. 336-37, also provided an interesting sidelight on this type of thinking. Bardolff had been given a job in the war ministry in which he became aware of the types of speculation still going on. He was particularly disturbed to find out that the Hungarian government was deliberately withholding cattle shipments; destined for army rations, in the hope that they might get a better price at some time in the future.

62 Gallian, Monte Ainalone, p. 96.

63 Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1951, pp. 8-9 (702-05). See also the equally optimistic assessment by Arz in his Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 333. Kvaternik's optimism does not appear to be genuine, but Arz's does; at this point in time, it says something important about Arz's sense of reality.
Russia. There could be no doubt that a number of bolshevist sympathizers had slipped through the screening process and were now intentionally or incidentally spreading bolshevism through the ranks of the army. Even those men unaffected by doubts and willing to continue the battle now showed discouragement.

Austrian efforts to escape the predicament into which the army and country had fallen received no aid or encouragement during September. Quite the contrary, on September 5, 1918, the Austrians learned that the United States had accepted the Czechoslovak government in exile as a full partner in the Entente—an unmistakable sign that America would now acquiesce in the dismemberment of the empire at the end of the war. Then, on September 11 American troops entered the front line in Italy for the first time. The pessimistic assessments of the Austrian intelligence service were that 120,000 American soldiers, twenty American machine gun companies, two American mountain artillery groups, and twelve American air squadrons were already in Italy and that 80,000 more men and 720 additional artillery pieces could be expected to arrive in the near future.

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65 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1872, p. (527).

66 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 447, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 1659/II, September 30, 1918. The matter of American troops in Italy was a continual puzzle to the Austrians. In October, the Armeeoberkommando admitted that the total strength was unknown and that it could "really not be estimated," though guesses ranged from 50,000 to 300,000 men. See Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 65, Army Group Command Archduke Joseph, Enemy Intelligence Group No. 48850/17, October 13, 1918.
The numbers were frightening to the dwindling Austro-Hungarian army. They were also false, but the Armeeoberkommando was not aware of how inflated the numbers really were. The final piece of bad news for the monarchy was that rumors were rife in Italy and the rest of the Entente camp that a major offensive was scheduled against the Austrians in Italy, probably at some time in the late autumn.\textsuperscript{67}

On the other fronts, the defenses of the Central Powers were collapsing. In the middle east, the British had launched a major attack, destroying the main Turkish armies in Palestine and pushing the Ottoman empire to the brink of defeat.\textsuperscript{68} By itself, the Ottoman setback in the far eastern Mediterranean would probably not have become an irrevocable disaster, but it was accompanied by a more important and far more immediate problem: the dissolution of the Bulgarian army and the complete collapse of the front in the Balkans.

Since the end of the July fighting the situation in the Balkans had been uncertain. The Italians had a distinct superiority over the Austrians in Albania, but the summer fighting had shown them to be incapable of exploiting this preponderance of numbers. A real question was the morale of the Bulgarian army, however. There had been much talk in its ranks about dissatisfaction and the desire to go home. Austrian and German commanders seemed to take this prospect rather lightly because the Bulgarians had had little exposure to

\textsuperscript{67} Fasc. 447, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group No. 1659/II. See also Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1951, pp. 6-7 (717-18).

\textsuperscript{68} The Ottoman surrender did not actually come until after the collapse of Bulgaria, but the defeat in Palestine made the question of their defeat merely a matter of time.
heavy combat. It appeared that only a minimal resistance on the part of the Bulgarians would be sufficient to check any Entente offensive.

Their complacency was soon shattered. On the morning of September 14, 1918, the Entente Powers began the largest artillery bombardment ever fired in the Balkan theater of war, and on the 15th the first moves were made to seize the necessary objectives for a breakthrough. By the morning of September 17 "a salient twenty miles wide and six miles deep had been driven into the enemy front." 69 On the 17th and 18th the troubles of the Central Powers increased. General Rusev, the commander of the Bulgarian 2nd division, panicked and ordered a retreat by his division without informing the units on either flank. When the Serbian divisions forming the spearhead of the Entente advance walked into the five mile wide gap in the lines created by this movement, the battle was as good as over. The Bulgarians began retreating on all fronts on the morning of the 20th, and by the 22nd of September the Entente Powers had advanced nearly twenty miles. On the morning of the 25th, British cavalry and infantry crossed the border into Bulgaria. 70

Bulgaria was in a state of turmoil. A republic had been declared in Radomir, and the Bulgarian king had only a few troops of his personal guard whom he could still trust. On September 26, 1918, the Bulgarians asked for a truce in order to arrange a full-scale armistice. It was granted, and on the night of September 29 an


70 Ibid., p. 223.
armistice was signed between Bulgaria and the Entente Powers to go into effect at noon of the 30th. It had taken only sixteen days from the beginning of the offensive to drive Bulgaria out of the war.

Bulgaria's retreat and collapse left the Austrian and German troops in the Balkans in a very precarious position. The Austrians in Albania found themselves with the sea on one side and the enemy on the other. Pressured by the Italians in front and by the French 57th division on their left flank, General Karl Pflanzer-Baltin's army began a slow fighting retreat that was fairly successful. 71 Forced back to Durazzo by October 14 and to Scutari by October 31, Pflanzer-Baltin's soldiers finally went into a fortified camp at Bocche di Cattaro, where they remained until mid-November. At that time the Entente Powers finally agreed to ferry them back to Austria. 72

In the Central Balkan areas the German and Austrian units were having absolutely no success in attempting to stem the advance of the Entente armies. The Austrians sent two divisions from Italy and one from the Ukraine into the Balkans, while the Germans contributed several divisions of their own; all were unsuccessful in halting or even slowing the offensive. Some Austro-Hungarian units sent into the area to cover the deployment of the newly arriving German and Austrian divisions did not succeed; this is hardly surprising under the circumstances, but General Ludendorff remarked contemptuously

71 Villari, *The War in Italy*, p. 245.

that they "did not fight well." 73 In truth, none of the units, including the German troops, were fighting well. Both armies were sending men into battle without supporting equipment. Divisions were being taken into Serbia by train, and often they could not completely detrain before they were attacked by the rapidly advancing Entente forces. Attacked while only half deployed, they had little choice but to retreat quickly or surrender. 74

Finally, due as much to the exhaustion and lack of supplies of the Entente armies as to defensive efforts of the Central Powers, the forces of Field Marshal Hermann Kövess, the new Austrian commander on the Balkan front, managed to form a defensive line on the Danube and Sava rivers. By the time the Entente Powers had brought up sufficient men and materiel to attempt an assault on the new defense, the war was over. Kövess' assertion that the Central Powers could have held this line on the Danube must forever remain speculation. The important factor is that the Entente forces were able to advance to the Danube in the first place and threaten an invasion of Hungary in late October. This threat was to play a decisive role in affecting the situation on the Italian front.

It was ill-conceived planning on the part of the Armeeoberkommando and a bad piece of luck that the Balkan front had now become a "Hungarian front" and that all of the Hungarian army units were in Italy, far from their newly endangered homeland. 75 There was no

75 Feldl, Verspieltes Reich, p. 319.
way the Hungarian soldiers in Italy or the politicians in Budapest could quietly accept such a state of affairs. In addition to the other strains wracking the army, this final blow to its unity was a death stroke. The Austro-Hungarian army now had to contend not only with an overwhelmingly superior enemy force on the other side of no man's land and the increasingly uncertain loyalty of the Slavic troops, but now also had to face the possibility of mass disaffection on the part of the hitherto steadfast Hungarian soldiers, who were anxious to return to Hungary and defend their homeland. 76

September saw yet another frustration of Austria-Hungary's peace hopes. The Austrian foreign minister Stephen Burian had sent a peace note to the Entente on September 14, but it had largely been ignored. The Allies, while generally receptive to the idea, gave the impression that Austria-Hungary's wishes were unimportant, that the only course to peace lay through German acquiescence. 77 Even if they were not ready to go along with Austrian desires for immediate peace at any price, the Germans were not particularly upset with Austria's latest unilateral move. Hindenburg's telegram to Arz of September 15, 1918, was quite mild in tone, asserting merely that since Austria-Hungary had army units fighting on the Western Front, it was the duty of those men to continue the battle until a definite agreement was reached. 78

77 Army Attaché (Haag) to Armeeoberkommando, September 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1910.
78 Hindenburg to Arz, September 15, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1911, p. (373). Brook-Shepherd, in The Last Habsburg, p. 170, however, says Hindenburg was furious.
Events during September, particularly the fall of Turkey and Bulgaria, plus the Austro-Hungarian peace initiative, convinced the Italians that they would have to take some immediate action to bolster their position at any postwar conference. Such a decision was quite consistent with the Italian presence in the war. Having become involved in the fray for the rather straightforward reason of territorial acquisition, the course of the war had left the Italian government in a rather embarrassing position. Italy's entry into the war had not dramatically swung the balance, and far from regaining the land of irredentist dreams, the country had instead lost one of its richest and most valuable provinces: Venetia. If the Italian government wished to have any bargaining leverage at the peace table, it would have to show some positive contribution to the winning of the war. Italian historians have long tried to portray the October 1918 offensive as an event long-expected and prepared for—an heroic attempt to defeat an arrogant and unbeaten enemy, decided upon before the collapse of the Central Powers began on other fronts. 79 There is substantial evidence, however, that it was a clear case of jumping on the band wagon.

As early as July 1918 Marshal Foch, the head of the Entente War Council, had begun pressing the Italians to prepare an offensive at the earliest possible date. In response, General Diaz, the commander of the Italian forces, informed Foch in a letter on August 13,

79 Villari, The War in Italy, p. 278. See also Franco Valsecchi, "Vittorio Veneto," History of the First World War, Vol. VII, No. 5, (n. d.), p. 3,060, who writes: "Numerically, the Italian forces were sharply inferior," at a date decades after all non-Italian historians had rejected such a contention.
1918, that "the current preparations will be finished by September 10." However, on September 4, General Treat, the new American commander in Italy, reported to Pershing that "the whole aspect appears to be that all preparation is for defense instead of being planned for an active offensive." Again, on September 21, 1918, Treat reported that, although "there has been a considerable amount of rumor and talk about an offensive... the atmosphere is not pervaded with an unmistakable spirit of decision and determination to all get together and start an aggressive campaign."

Italian hesitancy to undertake an autumn offensive was underscored on September 24, 1918, when Orlando wrote to Foch that "an Italian offensive would be exposed to great dangers." He went on to say that Italy would not be ready to start an offensive until spring of 1919 and that an immediate attack could be made only if at least ten British or French divisions were sent to aid the Italian forces. He ended his letter, however, by leaving open the possibility of an autumn battle: "Although it hesitates before this decision [to launch an offensive], the Italian government will agree without restriction to it if Marshal Foch will accept entire responsibility for the development of operations on the Italian front."

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81 Treat to Pershing, September 4, 1918, The United States Army in the World War, Vol. VI, p. 536.

82 Treat to Pershing, September 21, 1918, ibid., p. 539.

From this letter, it is evident that as late as September 24, 1918, the Italians were not willing to conduct an offensive in 1918 unless the Entente Powers forced them to do it. Then, on September 26, the day Bulgaria asked for an armistice, thereby leaving open an advance through the Balkans to the Hungarian border, the Italian Supreme Command issued orders for an offensive to begin on October 16, although only two days earlier Orlando had informed the Entente War Council that such an offensive was impossible. After so much dawdling, the Italian haste was remarkable but understandable. They feared that hesitancy at this time would jeopardize their postwar territorial aims.

The volte-face of the Italians and the reasons for it did not escape the notice of their allies. Colonel Girard, Foch's liaison officer with the Italian Supreme Command, wrote to his commander: "the hot haste of events excites most of the Supreme Command which fears being forestalled by an armistice and wishes to begin an offensive as soon as possible." It was ironic that the Italian government was being driven into the country's last battle of the war by the same greed and fear of losing out on the division of spoils that had led it into the war in the first place.

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84 Foch was willing to take the responsibility of ordering the Italians to carry out the attack. On September 28, still unaware of any change in Italian plans, he wrote to the Italians: "There is no war without risk," and urged them to begin an immediate attack. *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, Book 2, p. 357.


86 See Falls, *Caporetto*, p. 177.

Diaz' plan for the offensive was reminiscent of the Austrian June offensive, but without the unnecessary side actions. Instead of numerous attacks all along the front, there was to be a single assault in the mountains and a major, coordinated offensive across the Piave aimed at the junction of the Austrian 6th and Isonzo armies. It was clear that Diaz intended to depend on the British divisions of his 10th army to spearhead the attack across the river because the Italian armies on either flank of the 10th army had crossing times later than that of the British. The Italians were going to let the British do the dangerous and difficult work of forcing the river. It is also of interest that once the breakthrough was completed, the British units were expected to step aside and act as flank guards to the Italian armies who were allotted the task of victoriously pursuing the beaten Austrians.

If the Italians were having no problems in making the decision as to where the attack should take place, the Austrians presented a picture of bemusement. In early October the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Burian, was predicting an upcoming Italian offensive, supported by 400,000 American soldiers. Yet the intelligence reports issued on October 1 by both the Armeeoberkommando and the Isonzo army tried to play down the possibility of an Italian attack in the near future. The most probable cause for the Austrian confusion

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88 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 271.
89 Burian to Trautimandsdorff, October 10, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1962, Telegram No. 364, p. (755).
90 Chief of the General Staff to Army Group Command Archduke Joseph, October 6, 1918, Fasc. 65, Army Group Command Archduke Joseph Enemy Intelligence Group No. 48850/17, September 13, 1918. See also
in regard to this matter was the Italians' own uncertainty over the
offensive. The Italian decision was largely a spur of the moment
matter, reached only when it became obvious that the Austrians were
in particularly bad shape.

Austria's biggest mistake, however, was to overestimate the
American commitment to Italy. Although the Armeeoberkommando was
aware that morale within the Italian army was rapidly improving,
there was still considerable doubt on the part of the Austrians that
the Italians would risk an offensive without major Entente support.
Since the Italians were supposedly receiving such gigantic infusions
of American troops, it appeared that the Entente was now providing
the needed support. Therefore, by mid-October the Austrians were
certain that an offensive was coming. All of their reasons for
believing this were wrong, but the conclusion was correct.

During the evening of October 23, 1918, a telegram was sent out
to all commands from the Armeeoberkommando, warning that during the
morning hours of October 24 the Italians would begin the final of-
fensive of the war.

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Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 447, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence
Group, Isonzo Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group Operations No.
9000, October 1, 1918, in 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group
No. 1782, October 14, 1918.

91 For information on Italian morale, see "Monatsbericht," Fasc.
447, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group, 6th Army Command Op-
erations No. 1379/Ev., September 30, 1918, in 11th Army Command Enemy
Intelligence Group No. 1746, October 1, 1918; and "Monatsberichte--
Stimmung in der ital. Armee," Fasc. 65, Army Group Command Archduke
Joseph Enemy Intelligence Group No. 40856/17, October 13, 1918.

92 Army Group Command Archduke Joseph to 11th Army Command, Octo-
ber 23, 1918, Fasc. 447, 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group,
Army Group Command Archduke Joseph Enemy Intelligence Group No. 50350/
7, October 23, 1918, in 11th Army Command Enemy Intelligence Group
No. 1839, October 23, 1918.
CHAPTER IX
DRANG NACH HAUSE

Vittorio Veneto must rank high in the annals of warfare among the battles that really did not have to be fought. An easily stoppable force met a highly moveable object and Italy had the great victory that the country needed for prestige and a more honored place at any postwar peace conference. The brief success that the Austro-Hungarian army enjoyed in stymieing the initial phase of the Italian offensive could not disguise the fact that the Austro-Hungarian army had ceased to exist for all practical purposes. The month of October had encompassed the nearly total dissolution of an army that had been in existence for almost 400 years. The most ironic ingredient of this ruin was that the sources of the army's destruction were largely internal to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

There is no question, of course, that the war hastened the process of the empire's collapse, but the war in Italy had little direct bearing on the course of events. Austria-Hungary's doom was sealed when the front collapsed in the Balkans and the Magyar half of the empire opted for a defense of the Hungarian portions of the monarchy rather than a defense of Austro-Hungarian lands as a whole. Because this breakdown in domestic unity preceded the Italian offensive, Vittorio Veneto was no so much a battle as a vehicle which
hastened by a week or two a predestined event: the total disintegration of the Dual Monarchy. The battle accomplished very little of military value and is of importance primarily for its political effect on the postwar world.

Austria had seen the handwriting on the wall ever since the June Battles had failed, and even Arz was aware that the monarchy's situation was beyond redemption. On October 5, 1918, Arz took one of the initial steps necessary for removing Austria-Hungary from the war. He ordered the formation of an armistice commission in Trent under the command of General of the Infantry Victor Weber von Webenau.\(^1\) Shortly thereafter, Weber received further orders which more fully outlined the parameters of his negotiating position. Weber was to carry out negotiations with the Italian delegation in order to conclude a "pure" armistice, that is, a cease-fire along presently held front lines. Brigadier General Vladimir Laxa was to conduct similar talks on the Balkan front. Arz's instructions to the two generals stated that they were to have a great deal of latitude but they were to avoid "giving the impression that the army might no longer be battleworthy, that conditions in the homeland and rear areas were desolate, and that a continuation of the war was precluded."\(^2\) Having formed the commission, Arz did not give it

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permission to begin its mission. It was to languish in Trent while Arz and the emperor determined the proper time to allow the commission to initiate talks with the Entente.

At the same time, the Austro-Hungarian civilian government and the Armeeeoberkommando began more positive steps to obtain a quick transition to peace. Willing to accept the provisions of Wilson's Fourteen Points, and certain that there could be no meaningful negotiations as long as Austrian troops remained in the captured Italian territories, the monarchy began to formulate plans for the evacuation of Venetia. While this was occurring, the foreign minister attempted to clarify Wilson's stand vis-à-vis an armistice.

On October 6, 1918, Wilson had responded to a German armistice proposal with a list of conditions which the Central Powers would have to meet in order to convince the American president of their sincerity in seeking peace. One of the three major stipulations to be carried out immediately was an evacuation of captured territories.\(^{3}\) Two telegrams on October 10 from Major General Alois Baron Klepsch-Kloth von Roden, the Armeeeoberkommando's liaison officer with the German High Command, indicated that the situation on the Western Front was highly unstable, and as a result the German foreign office believed that an acceptance of Wilson's terms was probable.\(^{4}\)

\(^{3}\)Military Attaché (Stockholm) to Arz, October 9, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1962, p. (786). See also Klepsch-Kloth to Armeeeoberkommando, October 9, 1918, ibid., p. (783).

\(^{4}\)Klepsch-Kloth to Arz, October 10, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 1963, Res. 1730/1010/2; and Klepsch-Kloth to Arz, October 10, 1918, ibid., Res. 1730/1010/3, p. (788).
This information served to stimulate the monarchy's desire to speed the evacuation of northern Italy.

A real dilemma faced the Armeoberkommando, however, when it came to concrete attempts to begin the withdrawal from Venetia. Neither of the only two viable choices open to the army was very palatable. If the army chose to pull back its troops as quickly as possible, they would have to abandon all the supplies and matériel that they had stockpiled in their rear areas. Considering the overall shortages that the army and monarchy faced, this solution was nearly unacceptable. The alternative to this was to attempt to move as much matériel as possible while the army held its present positions. The objection to this plan was that transportation resources were so scarce that months would pass before the army itself could begin its withdrawal. "The evacuation of the Italian territories did not therefore come into further consideration; furthermore, no inquiry was put to us referring to this matter," Arz stated in his memoirs.  

As a matter of fact, the question was very much under consideration. In an effort to coordinate an orderly evacuation process, a meeting was called for all army general staff chiefs in Baden on October 14.  

5Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 308-09.

6Armeoberkommando to Army Group Command Archduke Joseph, October 12, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 65, Army Group Command Archduke Joseph Enemy Intelligence Group, Armeoberkommando Operations No. 148906. The lack of an Enemy Intelligence Group No. on this document and the fact that it is dated as having been received on October 11 leads me to believe that the document was misfiled by the army group.
begin the transfer back to the hinterland of all the small arms and artillery ammunition that he could spare. Then on October 14, the war ministry sent a message to all commands warning them that the evacuation of Venetia must be an orderly process. Fear was expressed that a move to leave the area could lead to wholesale disorders and looting. On the same day Weber informed the Armeeoberkommando that "now the evacuation of the occupied Italian territory cannot be avoided, and it is an obvious precaution that this matter is intimately connected with Armistice negotiations." The meeting on the 14th proceeded much as expected. All army and army group chiefs of staff were in attendance and a unanimity of opinion manifested itself. Everyone present was certain that the armistice would be concluded before the winter and that the solution of only two major issues were prerequisites for the armistice: retreat to the old borders of the empire, and establishment of procedures for an orderly demobilization. All present believed that the Fourteen Points were a certain foundation on which they could base their plans. Serious discussions were conducted concerning the exact location of the new borders of the empire, based on the "self-determination of the peoples." The naiveté exhibited by the officers at this meeting was awe-inspiring.

On October 15 the Armeeoberkommando announced that the monarchy was fully willing to return its troops to its prewar borders and await the decisions of a peace conference concerning the possibility of new borders if Italy would do the same. The main concession that the monarchy would make to the Italians besides the evacuation of Venetia would be the immediate and unilateral release of all prisoners of war in the occupied area.11 This last gesture seemed to be very generous but it had an ulterior motive. It would be difficult for the monarchy to continue feeding their Italian prisoners due to the monarchy's food shortages; furthermore, Austria-Hungary lacked the transport to move prisoners back to the hinterland. The simplest solution was to appear generous.

Austria-Hungary seemed to have made an adequate start towards a rapid and graceful withdrawal from the war. The evacuation of the captured territories and the release of the Italian prisoners of war would hopefully placate the Entente Powers. In addition, the attempt to end the war rapidly would alleviate Hungarian fears about their threatened and nearly undefended southern borders. The only remaining obstacle for the monarchy was the nationality question, both in respect to internal political demands and the requirement by Wilson that self-determination be allowed the peoples of the monarchy.

Emperor Charles believed that he had a solution to this problem which would satisfy both the Entente and the nationalities. On the evening of October 16, 1918, Charles issued an imperial manifesto in which he declared that "Austria shall become a federal

state, in which each racial component shall form its own state organization in its territory of settlement. . . . This reconstruction. . . shall guarantee to each national individual state its independence.\textsuperscript{12} The manifesto illustrated in stark detail both Charles' good intentions and his lack of common sense. A few years earlier the promulgation of this document might have saved the empire, but sprung upon a war-weary, disunited populace at a time when the monarchy was on the brink of defeat, the manifesto only created confusion and uncertainty among the loyal members of the population, and a centrifugal fervor among those with weakened allegiance. Ultimately the manifesto spelled defeat for Austria-Hungary.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Brook-Shepherd, \textit{The Last Habsburg}, p. 176.

\textsuperscript{13} Arz later admitted that the manifesto had not fulfilled the hopes he and the emperor had for it. They hoped that the population would accept it as a promise of future independence and autonomy in local government and in the meantime would rally around the dynasty. Instead, the manifesto "had only increased disorder and hastened the disintegration of the empire," and "given the monarchy a deathwound." See K. V. Werkmann, "Das Oktobermanifest von 1918 im Urteil der Zeitgenossen," as quoted in Regele, \textit{Gericht über Habsburg Wehrmacht}, p. 157. Feldl, \textit{Verspieltes Reich}, p. 311, states: "If one reads the 'imperial manifesto' of October 16, it remains incomprehensible that men who had held leading political positions for years could have composed a document that could precipitate into chaos overnight an entire empire in which the governmental apparatus was still completely functional." Since the manifesto was so important in the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy, it is rather surprising that more research on the origin and effects of the document has not appeared in English. It is not within the scope of this dissertation to discuss the manifesto in detail, other than to illustrate the general effect that its publication had on the fortunes of the army in Italy. As a result, the discussion of the manifesto has been rather cursory, more so than is really to be desired in the consideration of so important a subject. See also Plaschka, \textit{Innere Front}, which contains information on the October Manifesto from several points of view; several of the articles in Richard Plaschka and Karlheinz Mack (eds.), \textit{Die Auflösung des Habsburgerreiches} (Munich: Verlag R. Oldenburg, 1970), also consider the problem.
Reaction to the publication of the manifesto was immediate. In Hungary Tisza was quoted the next day as saying, "We have lost the war."\(^{14}\) His sentiments were echoed elsewhere in Hungary. On October 19 the *Neues Pester Journal* commented that "old Austria has definitely ceased to exist,"\(^{15}\) and the Hungarian parliament responded to a sentiment general in Hungary when it announced, "The homeland is in danger, the Hungarian soldier must [return and] defend his fatherland."\(^{16}\) Such reactions were not limited to Hungary. In Vienna "great consternation reigned in the war ministry,"\(^{17}\) and by October 30 Arz was forced to admit that "Austria-Hungary is now divided into five independent and non-allied states."\(^{18}\)

The problem was one that Charles had failed to foresee. The October Manifesto had given the nationalities the impression of immediate independence. Arz and the emperor had hoped that the nationalities would take the manifesto as a promise of change once the war ended; they hoped that the status quo would prevail until that time. The nationalities were more pragmatic. Since they were aware that the war could no longer be won, they believed that they must take immediate steps to consolidate their own positions and territories. Since there were numerous, pending territorial conflicts, the civilian governments of the various "nations" were, first of all, concerned

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\(^{14}\) Feldl, *Verpilte Reich*, p. 314.


\(^{16}\) Arz, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, p. 327.


with calling home the soldiers of their own nationality to defend these claims. The "nations" believed, with full justice, that it would be useless to concern themselves with the fate of a rapidly defunct political entity such as Austria-Hungary.

Because of the nationality problem, the soldiers at the front were confronted by conflicting demands on their loyalty. The emperor and Austria-Hungary had received their oaths of allegiance, but for all practical purposes the empire no longer seemed to exist. The dynasty still endured but a young emperor was a difficult and somewhat shadowy entity to obey when conflicting claims came from national homelands. Francis Joseph's longevity had made him a stable factor in the dual monarchy; Charles had no such claim to loyalty. Any sense of duty to the empire now lay with each soldier's sense of loyalty to his comrades in arms rather than to the ephemeral political definition of empire. Some men could argue, as did a few Hungarians, that the state building process going on in the homelands had to be protected by the army and that this could be done only by remaining battleworthy, remaining at the front, and not looking back over the shoulder.\textsuperscript{19} Such arguments appealed to reason, and reason in conflict with emotion often loses. The fate of the army in Italy now depended on such a narrow hope.

Attempts were made by the empire and army to retain the loyalty of the men and to alleviate the danger of a collapse of the army before the war could be brought to an end. On October 22, 1918, Archduke Joseph was transferred to Hungary and given command of all

forces there in the belief that he was the only commander the Hungarians would really trust. 20 Such a move could do little by itself, however, in view of the earlier miscalculations that had left no Hungarian troops in Hungary.

Emperor Charles next issued a message to the soldiers of the monarchy in which he asked them to remain steadfast in their honor and duty to their country. The tone of the message exuded confidence, but the tenor was false. Matters had proceeded too far for reassuring letters to help restore morale. 21 The emperor's other contribution towards restoring confidence and order was a desperate and rather quixotic attempt to get the pope to intervene in temporal affairs and arrange a quick end to the war. 22 This effort came on the 23rd of October and was rendered useless by two events: the onset of the Italian autumn offensive on the next day, and the fact that outright rebellion had already begun in the Austro-Hungarian army in Italy. The pessimistic Boroević had been much closer to the truth when he informed Charles that the events of October 16-20 had "worked the highest mischief" and that the final results "were unforeseeable." 23 Within a few days the consequences were plain to see.

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22 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 333.

There had been isolated cases of mutiny, desertion, or rebellion throughout 1918. Sometimes the cases came in spurts as occurred when the general strikes were suppressed in January. Nevertheless, a real turning point came on October 20. There had been a growing unrest in the ranks of the army which was aggravated by the imperial manifesto and the resultant calls by the various governments for their soldiers to return home.\textsuperscript{24} The soldiers had not responded because there was still uncertainty about the legitimacy of the government. Károlyi’s demand on the 20th that the Hungarian army return home served as a catalyst. There was little doubt that Hungary had a legitimate government and as a result, from Odessa\textsuperscript{25} to the Val Sugana, Hungarian troops announced that they would fight no longer in foreign lands. They must, they said, obey the orders of the Hungarian government to return home.\textsuperscript{27} The Italians, too, heard of the unrest and dissension within the monarchy and on the same day thousands of propaganda leaflets, the clearest pack of lies showered through the air. Invitations to mutiny and treason, the promise of what they want most to all men: return home, peace, free self-determination of the people,

\textsuperscript{24} See Berndt, \textit{Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision}, p. 40; and Rost, \textit{Geschichte des K. u. k. Feldjägerbataillons Kopal No. 10}, pp. 399-400. Both agree that it was surprising that desertion rates were not higher under the circumstances. Pichlik, "Das Ende der österreichisch-ungarischen Armee," gives the best and most thorough account of the mutinies of 1918, though his communist orientation leads him to concentrate on strikes.

\textsuperscript{25} Krauß, \textit{Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage}, p. 267.

\textsuperscript{26} Cramon, \textit{Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse}, p. 189.

\textsuperscript{27} See Berndt, \textit{Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision}, p. 43. These reactions were coming mainly from reserve units. Front line units were still relatively isolated and unaware of the ferment to their rear.
independence for the nationalities of our monarchy and everything else.

What can we offer against this: further fighting, hunger, separation from wife and children, injury and death in rifle pits. Everything else is pie in the sky [Wechsel auf die Zukunft]. In truth an unfortunate fight.28

Over the next two days parts of several divisions in Army Group Bel-luno either mutinied or refused to move forward out of reserve.29

On October 22 the Armeeoberkommando sent a telegram to all commands reporting that in a garrison near Vienna 200 Czech soldiers tried to desert on the grounds that they were no longer subject to the laws and orders of the Austro-Hungarian government; they must instead obey their new government in Prague, the soldiers insisted. This raised a legal question which the army could not deal with. Did the manifesto really give them this right? It was a sticky problem and one which the Armeeoberkommando did not want to face.

In an attempt to avoid more problems of the same kind, the Armeeoberkommando ordered all higher commands to take note of the case and take all possible steps to make certain that the front remained free of such "phenomena."30 As usual, the Armeeoberkommando was running several days behind the course of events.

All attempts to isolate the troops at the front from the disorders and confusion in the hinterland were breaking down, and on October 23 both Hungarian and South Slav troops in Boroević's army group announced their refusal to fight any further, averring that

30 Armeeoberkommando to all commands, October 22, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2036, p. (248).
they had to defend their homelands. Then, on October 25 the 79th infantry regiment, composed mainly of Croats, took over the city of Fiume, a prize desired by the infant South Slav state. They opened the prisons, overpowered the city police, and disarmed all of the Magyar troops in the Honvéd barracks. Postwar aims were already becoming ascendent over the necessity of finishing the present war. This incident could only emphasize the fears of the various nationalities and demonstrate that the need to bring their own troops home was a real one.

With the Austro-Hungarian empire a collection of fragmented peoples, and the Austro-Hungarian army in a state of mutiny, in which units left the front lines without authorization from any commanders, it appeared that the situation could not get much worse; however, it did as the Entente forces began their offensive.

The offensive opened on October 24 on the mountain front. The first day of fighting was fierce. In the Mt. Grappa sector, six Italian divisions formed the main thrust of the attack while three more divisions waited in immediate reserve. Two further divisions were committed against Mt. Tomba. Despite severe losses among...

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33 The question of when and where the various Austro-Hungarian units mutinied and the relationship of this to the offensive has been of great interest to a number of authors. Instead of going into this matter in great detail in the text, I have decided to put a chronology of the mutinies into an appendix. In this way their scope and frequent occurrence will not complicate the main text.

the Austro-Hungarian units defending the area, the defenders put up an excellent fight. By evening some of the regiments had suffered between 30% to 70% casualties, but had not only managed to hold on to most of their defensive lines but also to counterattack and re-take positions lost in the first Italian onslaught. Among the soldiers in the front lines the distress and dissension of the previous months seemed to dissolve under the enemy fire. Many were reminded now that there was a more deadly enemy across no man's land and that survival meant more than politics. Poles, Ruthenians, Czechs, and Hungarians forgot their differences in the struggle to survive, and units composed of all these nationalities received special mention in dispatches for their courageous fighting on the first day of the battle. Some wavered and decided that this was no longer their fight, but most decided to stay.

In some ways, the success of the first day of defense had been too great and it seemed to lead to euphoria among the members of the Armeeoberkommando. They reported to Emperor Charles and one of his ministers that the attack had been expected and that the Armeeoberkommando was "not anxious" over its progress. It was true that the positions had been held and that Italian losses had been heavy, but there were three problems: first, the Italians had not expected

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35 Gallian, Monte Asalone, p. 151.

36 Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, p. 91. See also "Lage bis 10 Uhr 30 vorm.," XXVI Corps Operations No. 270/6, October 24, 1918, in Kriegsarchiv (Vienna); Manuskripte, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," No. 27, untitled.

37 Windischgrätz, My Memoirs, p. 266.
great success in the mountain fighting although they hoped for it; second, Austrian losses were also high, and there were no immediate replacements available; third, on this day a further Hungarian call for their soldiers to come home and defend their fatherland became widely disseminated among the front-line troops.

When the battle resumed on the morning of the 25th, the majority of the Austrian troops again defended themselves bravely, but the losses of the first day, combined with the units' already reduced rifle strength, began to tell. Slowly the Austro-Hungarian units began to give ground. At approximately 0915 the Italians finally took the crest of Mt. Pertica and began to press even further forward before being repulsed by a desperate counterattack. The Austro-Hungarian troops were now nearing the end of their ability to hold out. Battalions were down to the strength of weak companies,

38 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 283. Italy claimed that the purpose of the attack in the mountains was to prevent the Austrians from switching their reserves to the Piave, but Edmonds points out that this was impossible for the Austrians since it would mean a thirty mile march over mountain roads. Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Fasc. 65, Army Group Command Tirol Enemy Intelligence Group, Operations No. 50550/6, October 25, 1918, contains an interrogation of an Italian prisoner, captured on the 24th, and states that the Italian mountain offensive was only a secondary operation.

39 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 2, Hauptmann Kleiner, "Die letzten Tage des III. Korps. der Zusammenbruch," October 24, 1918, p. 2. In this manuscript, the dating is as important as the pagination.


41 "Ereignisse bis 11 Uhr," Manuskript No. 27, I Corps Operations No. 298/1a, October 25, 1918. This manuscript has no pagination. One must rely on unit designations and operations numbers for identification. Since the manuscript is unbound, the dates were out of sequence in 1975.
some having no officers left unwounded. One regiment could now muster only forty-nine men to defend its length of front.\textsuperscript{42} The need to move what remained of the reserves forward now became paramount, but when this was attempted, the true extent of the catastrophe in the army was revealed. Unit after unit was reported as being in a state of mutiny. Some refused to enter the front lines, others just began marching home. Isolated officers were able to rally a few men around them to do their duty, but as a whole the situation had become completely chaotic.\textsuperscript{43}

No one was in control of matters anymore. It was impossible for any rear area headquarters to issue orders and have confidence that the instructions would be obeyed. Units in the front lines usually remained in their positions and continued to obey orders and fight, but for most of these few men the guiding principle was no longer duty, loyalty, country, but merely survival. Usually they had no idea of how far the dissolution in the rear had gone or what the true state of affairs might be. All they could know for sure was that they could not hold their positions much longer and no one was coming forward to relieve them. It could only be a matter of time until the thin crust of the forward defenses gave way, and once the breakthrough began, there were no Austro-Hungarian reserves that could prevent a complete rout.

On the 26th the Italians resumed their attacks on Army Group Belluno. The attacks were not carried out with the fervor or

\textsuperscript{42}Gallian, \textit{Monte Asalone}, pp. 172-73.

numbers of the first two days, which was a blessing for the defenders. Still, by late afternoon the army group had to report that it had reached the end of its ability to resist. Casualties had become unacceptably high, and the infantry units only had enough ammunition for one more day of fighting. A few reserve units that would still obey instructions were brought forward, but these few men added little to the fighting strength. The necessity of protecting these remaining riflemen was so great that the wounded were evicted from their tunnels so that the able-bodied could shelter from enemy artillery fire. The suffering of the wounded, lying in the open under fire, was terrible. In the chaos of these last few days of the war, the plight of the wounded was often forgotten. No transport existed to return them home, and those units that revolted and began marching to the rear seldom seemed to remember their comrades in the first-aid stations and hospitals. It is likely that most of the wounded ended up in Italian prisoner of war camps and may have formed the bulk of the 30,000 Austrians who died in the camps after the war. The story of what happened to these men between the Austrian retreat and the time of their capture is largely unknown, but it cannot have been edifying.

Despite the lack of men and ammunition, Army Group Belluno made plans to carry out a counterattack on October 27. The commanders hoped to retake most of the ground lost in the last three days

44 "Erreignisse zwischen 2 Uhr 30 nachm. u. 6 Uhr nachm.,” XXVI Corps Command Operations No. 272/16, October 26, 1918, Manuscript No. 27. See also Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuscripts, Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "J," Italy, No. 20, "Erreignisse an der Südwestfront," Army Group Belluno, October 26, 1918, pp. 1-4.

45 Gallian, Monte Asalone, pp. 176-78.
before the Italians could consolidate their new positions. Although
the price might be high, it would allow the Austrians to reoccupy
their best defensive line. To the surprise of everyone concerned,
the units of Army Group Belluno that were scheduled to counterattack
on the 27th not only carried out their instructions but were also
successful. They captured all of the lost ground and took a large
number of Italian prisoners. ⁴⁶ It was their last gasp, however.
Army Group Belluno was now finished as a fighting force. Its am-
umutions supplies were exhausted and its tired regiments reduced to
150-300 men apiece. ⁴⁷ Once regiment now had only forty men left,
and this once proud unit was reorganized as two weak companies. ⁴⁸
As a final blow, the front line units had begun to crack. During
the night before the offensive, a Honvéd cavalry division deserted
en masse, throwing away their weapons and fleeing. ⁴⁹

The only thing which saved Army Group Belluno from complete
destruction at this moment was the fact that the Italian 4th army,
which was conducting the offensive, was also exhausted. The Italian

⁴⁶Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, p. 106. See
also 48th Division to 13th Schützen Division, October 26, 1918,
Operations No. 1026/9, and 48th Division to 13th Schützen Division,
October 27, 1918, Operations No. 1027/II, in Manuscript No. 27.
I Corps to XXVI Corps, October 27, 1918, Operations No. 300/2,
ibid., also contains useful information on this battle.

⁴⁷"Ereignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X/-4./XI. 1918," Army
Group Belluno, October 27, 1918, P. 3. See also 4th Infantry Divi-
sion to XXVI Corps, October 27, 1918, Operations No. 1027/C, in
Manuscript No. 27.

⁴⁸Gallian, Monte Asalone, pp. 173-79.

⁴⁹Rost, Geschichte des k. u. k. Feldjägerbataillons, Kopal
No. 10, p. 403.
casualty list for the four days of the battle had not been negligible, and was estimated as nearly 35,000 men killed, wounded, and captured.\footnote{Oesterreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, p. 604.} The counterattacks on the 27th by the 17th, 48th, and 13th Schützen divisions had evidently convinced the Italian Supreme Command that the Austrian units on the mountain front still presented a formidable obstacle. Although the Italians continued sporadic attacks, the main fighting on the mountain front now ended. The focus of the Entente effort now shifted to the Piave River, where the situation was developing much more favorably for them.

Paradoxically, it was this pause in the fighting which wreaked the most irrevocable harm on the Austro-Hungarian units in the Tirol. During the four days of vicious fighting, the men had not been able to think about anything except survival. Now their mail packets from home revealed the true state of affairs in the hinterland. Now the trench rumors were confirmed; the independent states of what was once the monarchy were calling all of their men home. Word of mutiny, revolt, and desertion was passed along from unit to unit. They learned of the divisions that just left the front and returned home. Now they wanted to do the same. The high morale engendered by the successes of the last few days plummeted. Army Group Belluno and Army Group Tirol fell apart.\footnote{Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 343. See also Gallien, Monte Asalone, pp. 180-81.}

Armeesoberkommando was being placed in a very difficult position. There was nothing that they could do now. Any action would alienate one group or another. On the 27th Archduke Joseph had received
permission to begin the transfer of Hungarian troops on the Italian front back to Hungary as quickly as was possible. The problem was how this was to be accomplished. Most of the Hungarian divisions on the mountain front were in the III and VI corps, but these units were under enemy attack. They could not be taken out of the line without immediate replacements to take over their defensive positions. Since the Piave front was in the process of collapsing, no troops could be taken from there. The only possible alternative appeared to be the use of the depleted Edelweiß division to relieve the Hungarian units. But when the men of the Edelweiß learned that they were being sent back into the front lines so the Hungarian soldiers could be sent back home, they, too, refused to move forward. The division considered to be the best in the Austro-Hungarian army had now refused to obey orders. It came as a severe shock to the Armeeeoberkommando, which now realized that no unit could be trusted any longer. To complicate the matter, two of the Hungarian divisions that were supposed to be relieved refused to continue holding the line and began to move towards the rear.52

After everything that had happened, it appears incredible that many of the Austrian commanders on the mountain front were still optimistic. The slackening Italian pressure on the 28th appears to have given the officers an unwarranted sense of accomplishment and security. The tone of the report on troop morale in the

52. Manuscript No. 9, III Corps, p. 3. See also XXVI Corps to Army Group Belluno, October 28, 1918, Operations No. 274/24, in Manuscript No. 27; and Glaise-Horstenau, Collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, p. 250.
11th army for the 28th was self-satisfied and, incredibly, it declared that everyone, including the Hungarian units, was happy.\textsuperscript{53} What was even more appalling was that the commanders let this over-confidence influence their own judgment. When the Entente forces broke through on the Piave front on the 28th, the evaluation made by the III corps command was that the breakthrough constituted an "unimportant, local enemy success."\textsuperscript{54}

By the 29th, however, the folly of the overly optimistic leaders became obvious. During that day a number of events occurred to jolt them back into reality. One of the staunchest Hungarian regiments revolted and demanded that its German commander be replaced because he could not empathize with the Hungarian cause,\textsuperscript{55} the Entente forces began renewed assaults on Mt. Spinuccia, ending two days of respite,\textsuperscript{56} the first orders were given to prepare matériel for destruction, and initial contingency plans were issued for a retreat.\textsuperscript{57}

By October 30 it was apparent to every officer on the mountain front that the situation was beyond repair. Though the units in


\textsuperscript{54}Kleiner, "Die letzten Tagen des III. Korps," pp. 6-8.

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., III Corps, pp. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{56}"Morgenlage am 29./10. 1918," XV Corps to XXVI Corps, Operations No. 607/1, Manuscript No. 27.

\textsuperscript{57}"Rückzugdispositionen," I Corps to XXVI Corps, October 29, 1918, Operations No. 302/9, Manuscript No. 27.
the mountains had managed to hold onto their positions, the units on the Piave had collapsed completely. The rapid retreat of Boroević's troops meant that the men in the Tirol would also have to retreat or face encirclement. The initial plan of retreat dictated that the first echelon of units would fall back into the old 1917 defense line. If that line could not be held, the units were authorized to continue retreating to the 1916 defense line. As a final resort, an alternative defensive position was contemplated along the Feladona-Cromiello-Tenno-Panarotte line. The fact that the army command was already considering three alternative defense lines to the rear at a time when its units still held an unbroken front, indicated that it had at last realized the seriousness of the situation and believed that the armies in the Tirol would soon suffer a collapse similar to the one taking place on the Piave. All of these plans proved to be so much wastepaper, however, because the course of events negated any and all plans.

The first units given the order to retreat were those that were not in direct contact with the enemy. It was hoped that these units could retreat without pressure and occupy their new defenses in good order. Once the new positions were established, the remaining front line units could also begin to withdraw. Unfortunately, the first wave of withdrawing soldiers did not stop in their designated positions but just kept on moving towards home. This meant that the divisions left holding the foremost lines would have to conduct their retreats under enemy pressure and with no safe refuge.

58 Kleiner, "Die letzten Tage des III. Korps, pp. 6-8.
behind them. An orderly withdrawal was nearly precluded, but the order was given, nonetheless, to begin the movement to the rear as of 0010 on October 31.\textsuperscript{59}

The retreat began on time and the initial phase was carried out with auspicious success. Rear guards were left behind with orders to hold out as long as possible but at least until 1800. Since the Italians were, as usual, failing to patrol aggressively, the Austrians were able to get their withdrawal well under way before the enemy became aware of their absence.\textsuperscript{60} Late in the afternoon of the 31st it finally became apparent to the Italians that the Austrian lines were unusually quiet. They moved forward in strength and captured those men in the Austrian rear guard who had maintained their positions as ordered. The battle on the mountain front had ended, and all that remained was an untidy retreat and a compromised armistice.

On the Piave front matters had not gone so well for the Austrians as events in the Tirol. It was not so odd that the Austrians were being beaten, however, as it was that the Italians were having so much trouble beating them. The mutinies in the Austro-Hungarian army had begun on the 21st, and by the time that the offensive across the Piave had begun, at least twenty-one out of the fifty-seven

\textsuperscript{59}XXVI Corps to 4th Infantry Division, October 31, 1918, Operations No. 276/12, in Manuscript No. 27. See also Gallian, \textit{Monte Asalone}, pp. 183-85.

\textsuperscript{60}Gallian, \textit{Monte Asalone}, pp. 192-200. Gallian remained behind as a member of his division’s rear guard and was captured. See also "Erreignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X.-4./XI. 1918," Army Group Belluno, October 31, pp. 1-2.
divisions that the Austrians had stationed in Italy contained units which were refusing to obey orders.

From the Entente point of view, the operations on the Piave were much more important than the battle in the mountains, and they devoted considerably more effort to the offensive. The assault opened on the night of the 23rd of October, when, in a preliminary raid, the English captured part of Papadopoli Island as a necessary jumping-off point for the main offensive.

October 24th, 25th, and 26th were spent bringing additional soldiers across the Piave to the island and securing the entire extent of it so that the main attack could begin on the 27th. The only vexations with the operation during the first few days had been some peevishness on the part of the British, who felt that the Italians were not putting their hearts into the operation. An Italian division which was supposed to have helped the British seize the island had "made no attempt" to cross the river until they were informed that the British had already captured it.61

The final assault across the Piave began on October 27, 1918. The Entente managed to acquire three different bridgeheads. The French XII corps crossed the river and attacked the Austrian 31st division emplaced along the shoreline and on Mt. Perlo. The 32nd regiment, consisting mainly of Hungarians from Budapest, panicked and fled the field. Most of the remainder of the division managed

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61 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations: Italy, pp. 274-80. See also Berndt, Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision, pp. 45-48, who points out that the defenders were also hampered by having fifteen of their artillery pieces rendered inoperative due to faulty ammunition.
to hold its positions on Mt. Perlo and to foil any further immediate advance.\textsuperscript{62}

Further downstream, the Italian XXII corps crossed the river and attacked the 11th Hungarian cavalry division, which was fighting dismounted. Due evidently to the actions of its commander, who "had lost all control of his troops," the division put up only a "trifling resistance."\textsuperscript{63} The failure of the cavalry to hold its positions had particularly dangerous implications for the 25th division. The 25th was already threatened with encirclement because the Hungarian unit on its other flank had also decamped. By the evening of the 27th the 25th division had no choice other than to retreat or become surrounded.\textsuperscript{64}

Entente planners had decided that the assault of the British XIV corps was to be the major and most vital element of the crossing of the Piave, and the immense success of the corps justified these expectations. Under a short but intense artillery bombardment, followed by an aggressive infantry attack, the Austrian 7th division rapidly collapsed.\textsuperscript{65} By evening, the British bridgehead was about two miles deep and six miles wide. The Armeeoberkommando still felt that the situation was not completely bleak since the Entente did not hold the area in much strength, and the Austrians had several divisions which could be quickly moved to contain the incursion by


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{64} Hoen, Die Deutschmeister, pp. 823-26.

\textsuperscript{65} Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, p. 620.
the British. 66

On the evening of the 27th the Austrians attempted their first counterattack. The 64th Honvéd division managed to make minor penetrations into the line held by the Italian corps, but it could not achieve any lasting success. The Armeeoberkommando determined to try another counterattack the next morning, supported by attacks against both the British and French bridgeheads at the same time. The 24th infantry, 8th cavalry, and 26th Schützen divisions were designated to carry out these assaults. The plan broke down, however, when it became apparent the next morning that units of all of these divisions had mutinied or refused to obey orders during the night. At this point, any hopes of containing the offensive across the Piave had to be abandoned. The initiative now lay entirely with the Entente forces.

On the 28th, the British continued their attacks and broke through the hastily formed Austrian defenses. The Italian XVIII corps, which had been stymied in its attempt to force a crossing of the Piave on the 27th, sidestepped its own front and used the British bridges and bridgehead for a renewal of its own offensive. The Austrian units in the sector were now faced with pressure from two corps attacking out of the British zone. Holes were opened in their front, and those reliable units that still existed among the Austrian reserves were used to plug these gaps. All reserves were now gone.

66Berndt, Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision, pp. 58-59. Part of the Armeeoberkommando’s optimism was generated by Boroević. The normally dour field marshal told Arz during the evening that the situation could still be salvaged. See also Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 343.
By the evening of the 28th the beachhead at Papadopoli was six miles deep and twelve miles wide; the Italian foothold at Marigliano had expanded and was now only two miles short of linking up with the British beachhead. The French attacks had been even more successful and seemed on the verge of achieving a complete breakthrough. After the optimism of the previous night, the Armeenoberkommando was now downright gloomy. The entire 6th army was reported to be on the point of dissolution, and the front was filled with gaping holes. What was worse, no more units existed that could be used to fill these gaps. If the Armeenoberkommando had been aware how bad the situation really was it would have been even more depressed. Communications had become so bad that the higher commands had completely lost touch with their combat units. As a result, they were largely unaware of the extent of the disaster developing along the Piave. As a matter of fact, the situation had deteriorated so badly that the 6th army judged that it could no longer make any meaningful plans or calculations since it no longer had the slightest idea what units had remained on the front lines.

Sixth army had disintegrated by the evening of the 29th. It

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68. Berndt, Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision, p. 60. The Armeenoberkommando was sufficiently alarmed, however, to order the immediate opening of armistice negotiations on the evening of the 28th. See Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeenoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2052, p. (285).
69. Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, p. 113. See also Hoen, Die Deutschemeister, p. 821, for a young officer's complaints about the confusion that was affecting the various headquarters units at this time.
no longer had a "front" but merely a motley of units in full retreat. Although the Isonzo and Tirolean armies still held their lines, such actions were no longer useful. Between the Isonzo army and Army Group Belluno there was no contiguous front. The units had no choice now but to retreat or be surrounded. Although the divisions in the Tirol did not begin their retreat for a couple of more days, the situation was much more urgent for the Isonzo army, and it began its own withdrawal on the 29th. As it did, Diaz ordered the 3rd Italian army opposite it to cross the Piave. 70

On the 30th of October Entente troops entered the town of Vittorio Veneto. Although the pursuit of the retreating Austrian army was to continue until November 4, the battle of Vittorio Veneto was effectively over. The Austrians still had vain hopes of putting up a defense on the Tagliamento River with such units as were still loyal and willing to fight, but the chances of achieving a "miracle of the Tagliamento" were non-existent. Routs, once begun, are difficult to bring to a halt without an influx of fresh troops, and such a reservoir of manpower did not exist. The only real hope for the monarchy was that its armistice negotiators could provide some sort of miracle.

The armistice commission that had been set up by Arz in early October had met under its leader, General Weber, several times and was therefore capable of acting rather quickly. The first really discouraging reports from the battlefield had begun to arrive at

70 An event which caused the British commander Lord Cavan to remark with some asperity, "It was about time." See Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 317.
Armeoberkommando headquarters on October 25. Although the fighting was still in its first stages and the danger of a breakthrough had not yet become evident, the growing uncertainty over the loyalty of the army had presented a definite threat. The 6th army's appreciation of the situation had led it to report to the Armeoberkommando on October 25 that as a result of the "dissolution and fall of Bulgaria," and the "confusion and economic difficulties of the homeland," ultimate defeat was inevitable and "an end must be put to the [present] state of war." 71

On the 28th of October the military circumstances on the Italian front had become such that Arz and Emperor Charles reached a definite decision to seek an immediate armistice. General Weber was ordered to make contact with the Italian Supreme Command and negotiate an armistice in accordance with the instructions that he had already received. 72

Weber's instructions were outlined in a secret operations order that made clear his position and negotiating limits. There were no major changes in his new orders from the ones received before. After stating that "the situation has made necessary the conclusion of an immediate armistice," the new order continued, "we have accepted all of the stipulations set by Wilson. We are ready to conclude an armistice immediately, in order to make an end to the completely useless bloodletting on the front." A final injunction to Weber showed the extent to which the Armeoberkommando was willing to go.

71 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 338.
72 Ibid., p. 345.
to conclude an armistice as fast as possible. "Every stipulation would be acceptable," the Armeeoberkommando informed him, "that does not infringe upon the honor of the army or constitute an outright capitulation." 73

At approximately the same time Weber received these instructions, the Armeeoberkommando also informed Army Group Boroević that the army must hold its present positions as long as possible so that an armistice could be arranged. Boroević's reply to this request was rather noncommittal as he felt that nothing could be promised in the present circumstances. The Armeeoberkommando evidently felt that Boroević's message was not positive enough and reemphasized its initial orders: "the destruction of the army must be prevented; the immediate need is the avoidance of a defeat which would lead to dissolution." 74 Unfortunately, the time for such a possibility had passed. Boroević knew it, and in reality so must have the Armeeoberkommando.

That night, Arz composed one of his most difficult messages. The time had finally come for Austria-Hungary to end its participation in the war under any circumstances. Despite the monarchy's assurances to the Germans, Arz now had to inform Hindenburg that Austria-Hungary had made an irrevocable decision, regardless of German wishes or demands, because:

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73. Armeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2052. See also Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Manuskripte, Erster Weltkrieg, 1918, Series "I," Italy, No. 19, Captain Camillo Ruggere, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," p. 2.

Troops without national differentiation of over thirty divisions refuse to fight any longer. Parts of individual regiments leave their trenches without authorization; a reserve regiment has even marched off home. March formations will not go to their allotted positions. Hungarian troops declare that they will no longer fight under any circumstances and demand to be sent home because their fatherland is in danger from enemies at its borders. Commanders are powerless. Admirably, some troops are still fighting because as a result of their warrior virtues [Kampfhandlung] they are still not contaminated with politics. Their battleworthiness is, however, crippled. Bringing up reserves or relief units is impossible since those troops will not obey orders to go to the front. . . . The High Command unanimously desires an armistice because otherwise there will be the certainty of anarchy and irresistible bolshevism.  

General Weber sent Captain Ruggera to the front lines south of Roverto early in the morning of October 29, 1918, with a letter which he was to attempt to deliver to the Italian Supreme Command. The letter contained the Austrian notice of intentions to negotiate an armistice, stipulating a precondition of advance agreement to all of Wilson's Fourteen Points. The missive also declared that General Weber and the members of his commission were available to begin negotiations immediately.

Captain Ruggera's mission began rather inauspiciously. As he and two enlisted aides approached the Italian lines they were met by small arms fire which wounded one of the aides. After seeing the man back to safety, Ruggera persisted in his effort and at 0920 was able to turn the letter over to an Italian officer. He then returned to Roverto to await a reply.  

The Austrians waited in vain throughout the day for the Italians to respond.

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75 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 346.
76 Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 3-4.
Since no reply had been forthcoming the Armeeoberkommando employed the radio station at Pola to broadcast a further message to the Italians. The gist of the broadcast was a warning that if the Austrians were forced to evacuate Venetia while participating in a battle, they would be unable to prevent widespread destruction and the demolition of roads and bridges. The broadcast stated that it would therefore be greatly to the advantage of the Italians if they would agree to an immediate cessation of hostilities.\textsuperscript{77}

Shortly after the completion of the broadcast Weber received his first indication that the Italians had received his messages. At 2200 the Italian Supreme Command replied to Weber’s letter of that morning, stating that it could not officially recognize his commission and authority since the document which he sent contained no express authorization from the Armeeoberkommando to conduct negotiations on behalf of Austria-Hungary. The message also stated that the Italian Supreme Command had no intention of beginning any discussions which might interrupt the conduct of combat operations. If Austria-Hungary was willing to begin negotiations under these conditions, the Italian Supreme Command would be willing to accept a fully accredited representative of the Armeeoberkommando for discussions concerning a cease fire.\textsuperscript{78} After Weber attempted to clear up matters with the Italians, the Italian Supreme Command responded

\textsuperscript{77}Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2062, 2055, October 29, 1918, p. (322). See also Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," p. 5, which has a slightly different text.

\textsuperscript{78}Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2068, October 30, 1918, p. (343). See also Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 6-7.
again that it could not accept the presence of Ruggera as an intermediary but asserted that Weber himself would be the only acceptable spokesman. 79

In one sense, this initial exchange of messages presaged the course of events over the next few days. The Austrians were frantically attempting to obtain an armistice as quickly as possible, hoping that this would allow them to save at least a portion of their army and maintain the empire's old borders. The Italians, on the other hand, finally had victory in their grasp; their troops were pouring forward through the broken ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army and it appeared that nothing but exhaustion could stop them. Besides the normal military precaution of not letting a beaten enemy off the ropes, the Italian Supreme Command had another reason for delaying the signing of an armistice as long as possible. Every delay would strengthen Italy's hand at postwar conferences. Italian troops on the Brenner would nearly guarantee Italian possession of the Southern Tirol. The Armeeoberkommando had waited too long to sue for peace. The enemy no longer had any incentive to quickly acquiesce.

Finally, on October 31, 1918, Weber's commission was allowed to cross into Italian lines. They were conducted to the Villa Giusti, where the negotiations were to take place. There they faced the next delay. They were told that the Italian negotiating commission would not arrive until the next day. 80

79 Ruggera, Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 6-7.

80 Ibid., p. 10.
When the Italian delegation under the leadership of the deputy chief of the Italian general staff, Lt. General Pietro Badoglio, arrived on November 1, further procrastination was apparent. It would be impossible, Badoglio stated, to begin negotiations on the 1st. The text of the Italian proposal was being prepared by the inter-allied war council in Versailles, and it would not be received until November 2 at the earliest. It was becoming clear to the Austrians that it was going to be very difficult for them to adhere to their instructions.

During the night of November 1 the Austrians were finally given an "informal" statement of the terms which the Entente Powers would require of them: (1) the "immediate" suspension of hostilities; (2) complete demobilization, the immediate withdrawal of all troops from the front, and the reduction of the postwar Austrian army to twenty divisions; (3) the immediate evacuation of all territory occupied by Austria-Hungary since the beginning of the war, and the withdrawal of all Austro-Hungarian forces to behind the Brenner Pass within a length of time to be specified later; and (4) occupation rights for the Entente Powers, including free movement through Austria-Hungary. Arz was "stunned" by the severity of the terms. Austria-Hungary had been hoping for a "pure" armistice, but it had been put into a position in which it could not be choosy. The terms were a demand for outright capitulation, and there was no doubt that to sign

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81 Ibid.
82 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, pp. 361-52.
them would impinge on the honor of the army. 83

Ruggera and Schneller left the negotiating site and returned to Trent to report personally to the Armeeoberkommando and to pass on a dispatch from General Weber. In addition, Schneller sent a Hughes wire to Waldstätten asking for instructions on how the terms should be answered. It was a "hot potato," and all that Waldstätten could do was promise to try to get an answer by noon on November 2. 84

November 2, 1918, was a day of indecision among the leaders of Austria (in a real sense it was no longer possible to consider the parliament and government in Vienna as being in control of any land except Austria). Emperor Charles desperately wanted an

83 From the point of view of Austria-Hungary, the worst aspect of these demands was the right of free passage. Arz and Charles had promised the Germans that they would under no circumstances agree to such a demand since the primary purpose of such a stipulation would be to allow the Entente Powers to attack Germany's southern border. The fears expressed by the Central Powers concerning this clause were probably overstated. It is highly doubtful that the Entente Powers could have moved a sufficient force through a hostile Austria and kept it supplied for such an offensive before 1919 at the earliest, and Germany had no intention of continuing the war that long. Still, it became a point of honor. Emperor Charles sent a special message to Emperor William II promising that if he had no other choice he would place himself "at the point" of those of his troops that remained loyal and personally prevent such free passage. William's answer must be somewhat suspect as a sarcastic masterpiece, if indeed he was capable of expressing such a sense of humor: "I was very moved to read your telegram with the news of an armistice proposal to Italy. I am confident that your German-Austrian soldiers, with your imperial highness at their head, will rise up as one man against ignominious conditions, and I thank you for explicitly assuring me. In true friendship, Wilhelm." Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2091. Unfortunately, William was probably being serious—but it was the only possible reply to Charles' theatrical promise.

84 Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 11-12.
armistice, but point 4 of the terms that he had been given amounted not to an armistice but to a surrender. In an effort to obtain advice, or at least salve his conscience, the emperor called in the parliamentary leaders of Austria for a conference.\(^{85}\) The leaders of the delegation refused to comment on the terms. Viktor Adler, the Socialist leader, informed Charles that "the war was begun by the emperor; it is his to end."\(^{86}\) Charles and the Armeeoberkommando were left to make the decision on their own and to take full responsibility for it.

If the Austrians were being indecisive about the matter of an armistice, the Hungarians were not. Béla Linder, a pacifist and the newly appointed minister of war in the Károlyi government, sent an official order to all Hungarian troops on November 1 commanding them to lay down their arms.\(^{87}\) When Waldstätten learned of this message he informed Arz immediately, and the chief of staff attempted to suppress the order.\(^{88}\) This was a forlorn hope since the order had already been passed along to the various army headquarters. Many of the radio operators were Hungarian, however, and they had no thought

\(^{85}\) The possibility exists, of course, that Charles was merely trying to live up to his newly proclaimed status as the ruler of a federated state, but his later actions (i.e. resigning rather than signing the armistice) tend to indicate that he was trying to avoid responsibility.

\(^{86}\) Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 364. It was possibly unfair to blame Charles for starting the war, but considering the later events in the Weimar Republic Adler was correct in refusing to have anything to do with the armistice.


\(^{88}\) Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 363.
of "losing" an order from the new Hungarian government. The order managed to filter on down the chain of command. 89

Arz's final reaction to the problem of how to deal with the Linder telegram was typical of his character. Rather than making a great effort to forestall events, he merely informed the commanders in Italy that Linder's order "is being carried out. The Hungarian government and Hungarian nation hereafter carry the full responsibility." 90 If Arz was satisfied merely to pass on the responsibility, his field marshals were not. Boroевич sent a Hughes wire to Waldstätten stating that he believed that the full responsibility lay on the shoulders of the army leaders. 91 The Armeekommando

89 There appears to be some confusion about this message from Linder. According to Armeekommando Secret Operations No. 2090, the message was sent on November 1, 1918. Österreich-Ungarn letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, p. 667, indicates that the message from Linder was dated November 2, 1918. Arz's memoirs, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 363, refers to the message in a manner implying that it was received by Arz on November 2, 1918. Pitreich, "Die k. u. k. Piavefront," Pt. III, p. 144, refers to having received a dispatch from Arz indicating that the Linder telegram was issued on November 1, 1918. Sources dealing with the events in Hungary during this period seem to believe that neither of the above dates is correct. Urbach, "Der Umsturz in Budapest," p. 149, states that Linder took office on October 31, and that since he was a pacifist, his first action was to order the Hungarian troops to throw down their arms, and his second action was to order the dissolution of the army. Szende, Die Ungarn im Zusammenbruch 1918, p. 97, states that Linder sent the telegram to Army Group Kövess on October 31. It is unclear if anything should be made of these disagreements, or whether the problem is just indicative of the chaos that existed in the monarchy during the last few days of the war. There may have been more than one message, but the most likely explanation is that Linder did compose and dispatch the message late in the evening of the 31st. If so, it is probable that it would not be received in Vienna until the 1st. Why Arz did not find out about it until the 2nd is a puzzling question.


91 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeekommando Secret Operations No. 2094, pp. (466 and 464).
then attempted to put the best face on the matter by informing both Boroević and Army Group Tirol that Linder's telegram was sent to them only as an "illustration of the difficulties" that the Armeeoberkommando was having in dealing with the newly emerging governments. "It is self-evident," the reply continued, "that further orders from the Armeeoberkommando will follow. For the time being it [the withdrawal and disarming] is not to be carried out with regard to the Hungarian troops."\(^{92}\)

Events in the homeland and the disastrous state of the army in the field on November 2 were driving Charles into a corner from which he could not escape. The army had not been able to make a stand on the Tagliamento River, and Army Group Belluno, which had put up so gallant a fight during the first days of the battle, was on the brink of destruction; its retreat was rapidly becoming a rout. Further communications from Weber and the Italians had made it clear, first, that the Italians were really not interested in negotiating any changes in the announced terms, and, second, that the hostilities would not be diminished until the terms were accepted.\(^{93}\) In light of the intransigence being shown by the Italian negotiators, it came as little surprise on November 2 when Diaz informed the Austrians that the Entente governments had demanded that the terms of the armistice be accepted by midnight of November 3.\(^{94}\) The implied alternative was the continuation of a battle which the

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\(^{92}\)Ibid., p. (463).

\(^{93}\)Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," p. 15.

\(^{94}\)Ibid., pp. 16-17.
Austrians had no hope of winning.

Faced with such a demand, Charles reached the only decision that he could realistically make. At 2330 on November 2, 1918, Waldstätten was instructed to give Weber the order to accept and sign the armistice terms as they had been presented. Weber was given permission to protest strongly against Point 4, the free movement clause, but since Austria could not substantively back up any protest, he was to sign the terms under any conditions insisted upon by the Entente Powers.95

Once the decision had been made, it became evident that a long night in Vienna had just begun. A great many details had to be taken care of immediately. The first point of the Italian ceasefire terms had specified the "immediate cessation of hostilities." Arz took this statement at face value and apparently acted without thinking through the possible consequences. Although the Italians had not even had the chance to find out that Austria had accepted the armistice terms, much less sign them, Arz sent a wire to all army commands at about 0200 of November 3 stating:

Armistice terms of the Entente have been accepted. All hostilities on land and in the air are to cease immediately. The details of the ceasefire conditions will be made known.96

95 Ibid., p. 24.
96 Armeeoberkommando to all Army Group Commands, November 3, 1918, Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2101, p. (482). Various accounts indicate a time discrepancy about this message. Secret Operations No. 2101 is marked as being sent at 0335. Captain Ruggera's detailed chronology states that this message was sent out between 0100 and 0200. See "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," p. 26. When taken in consideration with the other events and messages of the night, it appears that Captain Ruggera's account and chronology of events are the most plausible.
Arz had evidently interpreted the "immediate" end of hostilities to mean concurrent with the Austrian acceptance of the terms. This was a rather rash assumption since he had no evidence that this was what was meant. A more prudent course of action would have been to delay such a ceasefire order until the armistice was officially signed; after all, the manual of military law stated that an armistice goes into effect at the moment signed. Arz may have feared that the Italians would consider continued Austrian combat operations after initial acceptance as a breach of their word, but while defensible, this interpretation was to have serious repercussions for the Austrian soldiers still in Italy.

Only a few minutes after having issued the ceasefire order, Arz had second thoughts. It is possible that the enormity of what he had done had sunk in, but more likely it was merely that Charles was still attempting to get the parliament to agree to his decision. Under any circumstances, a second message was issued at 0215 stating that the first dispatch was "annulled." At first it appeared that it might be possible to cancel the order since the actual broadcast to the Italians had not yet occurred. Unfortunately, the message had reached the Austrian army in Italy. Army Group Tirol quickly responded to Arz's second wire with a protest that it could not cancel the order since it had already been forwarded to subordinate commands. The 11th army general staff chief was especially vehement on the matter, stating that cancellation of the notice of peace would cause wholesale commotion and disorder among the war-weary troops.97

The Armeeoberkommando was left with no alternative then, but to abide by Arz's first, hasty decision to cease hostilities.

Another urgent problem was for the monarchy to find some way of circumventing Charles' rather vainglorious promises to Emperor William. In a move reminiscent of 1866, a solution was found. At 0300 Charles officially resigned his post as commander-in-chief of the army and designated Arz as the new commander. This meant that Arz would become "responsible" for signing the armistice and the dynasty would save face at the expense of a loyal general.

At 1100 on the 3rd, General Weber telegraphed the Armeeoberkommando that he had received the official copy of the armistice terms and that they were in all respects similar to the unofficial copy which the Austrians had received on the previous day. He was therefore given permission to sign the document and the official signing time was to be 1500, on November 3, 1918. At this time the military situation was clear. The 6th army and the Isonzo army were still holding most of the line of the Tagliamento, although Entente penetrations across the river had occurred; the 10th army was holding positions along the border of Austria in the mountains around the Brenner Pass; the 11th army was in general disarray, splintered into individual units holding (or clogging) the various roads between the Tagliamento River and the 10th army.

When the delegations from the two countries met at 1500 to sign the armistice, the Austrians received a shock which embittered them more than any other aspect of the end of the war. Weber opened

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98 Arz, Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges, p. 368.
the conference by informing the Italian commission that "the imperial and royal army supreme command has, in the first morning hours of November 3, given me the order by radiotelegram to accept the armistice conditions. . . . At the same time, the imperial and royal army supreme command has instructed the Austro-Hungarian army to cease hostilities."  

Weber was horrified when Badoglio blandly informed him that it would be impossible to inform all Italian units of the cessation of hostilities in less than twenty-four hours and introduced a new protocol to the armistice specifying this. Weber protested violently, but during a brief recess was unable to get into contact with the Armeeoberkommando in order to inform it of this new hitch.  

Badoglio then informed Weber that he would have to accept the documents as presented or negotiations would be broken off. Weber was left with no choice but to sign the document.

Badoglio then proceeded to rub salt into the wound by signing the documents and then looking at his watch. Although it was already 1520, he declared, the official cessation of hostilities could go into effect at 1500 on November 4.  

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100 Throughout the negotiations Weber was plagued with intermittent communications difficulties. A suspicious mind might note that he was never able to achieve quick contact with the Armeeoberkommando when it was necessary that he do so, but that routine messages and replies flitted back and forth with little or no problem.

101 Ibid., pp. 39-40. See also Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, pp. 426-34, which contains the complete text of the armistice and the attached protocol. Long after the war had ended, the parliament of the Austrian Republic was still questioning the Armeeoberkommando about how and why the armistice was signed.

102 Edmonds and Davies, Military Operations, Italy, p. 378.
unable to make any contact with the Armeeoberkommando through his Italian radio transmitter until 1800.\textsuperscript{103} Under any circumstances, it was too late for the Austrian army.

The Italians' justification for the twenty-four hour delay was that their communications with their front line units were poor and that it would take at least that long to notify them of the cessation of fighting.\textsuperscript{104} There are several objections to this argument, not the least of which is the fact that even on the Balkan front, which included troops of British, French, Italian, and Serbian extraction, all units were quickly informed of the Balkan armistice, usually in less than six hours; and the Balkan terrain conditions presented a much more difficult communications problem than did northern Italy. In actuality, the most immediate reason for the communications delays was probably an Italian desire to use the extra time to obtain the greatest victory and the most impressive number of prisoners and amount of territory possible.\textsuperscript{105}

The terms of the armistice and protocol simply stated that at the exact time the armistice went into effect, the front line would be defined as that line connecting the most advanced units of the

\textsuperscript{103} Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 15-16.

\textsuperscript{104} Villari, War on the Italian Front, pp. 288-91.

\textsuperscript{105} Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 15-16, points out that from the time Weber crossed the Italian lines until he met with the deputy chief of the Italian general staff only thirty-eight hours had elapsed, and that from the first attempt to cross the line himself to the receipt of the text of the armistice from Versailles took only 103 hours. He also points out that the Austrians, with broken communications and an army in disintegration, were able to pass on the cease fire order in less than six hours. The Italian reasons for the delay, he argues, are therefore highly questionable.
Italian and English forces. All Austrian troops behind that line would be considered as prisoners of war. The Italians had already been informed by General Weber that the Austro-Hungarian forces had ended hostilities; they therefore knew that they had little to fear from Austrian attacks. Shortly after the 1500 signing time on November 3, a hastily assembled invasion force landed in the city of Trieste and claimed the town for Italy. Also during the twenty-four hour period between the signing and the implementation of the armistice the Italians sent unsupported cavalry and motorized patrols as far behind the Austrian lines as they could move. The Austrian units, believing that the war was over, merely watched them pass.

Once Weber contacted the Armeeoberkommando and informed it of the new situation created by the protocol, it attempted to forestall the inevitable result. An immediate notice was sent to all commands warning them that the armistice would not become official until 1500 on November 4. The Armeeoberkommando also instructed all subordinate commands to protest any effort by the Italians to take prisoners of war. The basis of the protest was to be the fact that the protocol was not given to the Austrians until they had already agreed to accept the original (and supposedly official) terms. Diaz was not sympathetic and refused to recognize the validity of the protests. He merely pointed out that the accredited negotiators of the Armeeoberkommando had accepted the conditions and signed the documents.

106 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2107. See also Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 41-42.
Therefore, the prisoners were to be taken with "complete justification."\textsuperscript{107} 

It is too easy to blame the Italians for what happened to the soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army on November 3 and 4. The Italians were obviously greedy to achieve a resounding success; General von Cramon referred to this behavior as "noisily slurping the victory cup."\textsuperscript{108} Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the Italians had legal justification for everything they did. Diaz was correct when he stated that by signing the armistice documents, the Austrians were agreeing to its terms. Although it appears that the Italians went out of their way to leave Weber with no choice but to sign and to make it difficult for him to inform his superiors of what was going on, there is no evidence of a definite plot. And if one is to indict the Italians for overreaction to victory, one must all the more find fault with the hasty actions of Arz, without whose initial blunder the Italian action would have had less importance.

The real tragedy was that Arz and Waldstatten had mishandled the armistice effort just as badly as they had bungled the direction of the June Battles. Their optimism, right up to the end, that the army could hold out delayed the beginning of negotiations until the army was already in retreat and facing dissolution. They then aggravated this chaotic state by their handling of the Linder message. Finally, the hasty ceasefire order, at a time when the enemy was not even informed that their terms had been accepted, was criminally

\textsuperscript{107} Ruggera, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918," pp. 44-45.

\textsuperscript{108} Cramon, \textit{Unser Österreich-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse}, p. 196.
stupid. The Italian insistence on the twenty-four hour delay was a disaster for the men of the Austro-Hungarian army, but if the Armeeoberkommando had not already placed their soldiers in an untenable situation, the Italian greed would have made less difference. The last comedy of errors was now to be played out.

For the troops, the real troubles began with the collapse of the 6th army on the Isonzo. Once the retreat began, no one could stop it. Units ordered out of reserve would either refuse to advance towards the front, or would, as one unit did, advance as far as they were told, and then immediately turn around and institute a hasty retreat. Units fought among each other, either for looting privileges or due to frustrations stemming from nationalistic causes. Along one retreat route a supply train commander began handing out all of the available rum to the men as they came by. The result was a predictable increase in looting, murder, and rape. Further towards the rear, the new South Slav government took over rear depots and railroads; this hindered the retreat. Coastal defenses along the Adriatic were abandoned and the remaining units in the area simply melted away. Trieste was left open, and


110 "Ereignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X.-4./XI. 1918," Isonzo Army, October 25, 1918, pp. 2-3. See also Berndt, Letzter Kampf und Ende der 29. Infanteriedivision, p. 72, for a description of some of the plundering activities.

111 "Ereignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X.-4./XI. 1918," Isonzo Army, October 30, 1918, p. 8.

a makeshift Italian landing party declared it captured.

Not all units and formations were willing to become the disorderly mobs which less disciplined units had degenerated into. Nationality was no determining factor as to which units held together and which did not, as has often been implied. Hungarian units steadfastly retained their arms in spite of the Linder message, conducted orderly retreats in concert with their brother units of other nationalities, and even sacrificed themselves in counter-attacks to allow other regiments the time to move into new defensive positions.  

113 Enough loyal units of all nationalities continued to fight numberless and unsung delaying actions so that the Entente advance proceeded slowly and took relatively few prisoners through November 2. It was largely these loyal units that were betrayed by the hurried ceasefire order during the early morning hours of November 3.

When orders to stand down were received, the soldiers naturally felt a great sense of relief and as a whole they let their guard down. The details of the armistice were not entirely known to them, but they all interpreted their orders for an immediate ceasefire to mean that they were not to hinder Italian movements through their lines in any way.  

114 In fact, it was not until 1000 hours that the

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114 Kleiner, "Die letzten Tage des III. Korps," November 3, 1918, p. 15. See also, "Ereignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X.-4./XI. 1918," Isonzo Army, p. 2. The 44th Schützen division allowed several enemy cavalry patrols to pass through the lines unhindered.
units in Italy were informed that the Italians were not going to recognize a cessation of hostilities until November 4.\textsuperscript{115} Even then the word did not reach all units, and some reported with surprise that they were still being fired upon by Italian soldiers, civilians, and released prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{116}

It was starting to sink in that something had gone wrong. The men had been ordered to stop fighting and to inform enemy units opposite them of the cease fire by means of sending parliaments across the lines. It came as a shock to discover that no English or Italian commander at the divisional level or lower had even heard that an armistice was being discussed.\textsuperscript{117}

The real meaning of the Italian patrols that had passed through Austrian lines on the 3rd and 4th now became painfully obvious. As the Austrian troops marched back towards their homeland they were met by roadblocks of Italian soldiers who informed them that they were now prisoners of war by terms of the armistice. Those units that had discarded their weapons early in their flight, or now surrendered them to the Italians had little choice but to go along to the internment camps quietly. Unarmed men could not defy even one or two machine guns.\textsuperscript{118} One unit, the 6th dragoons, entered the outskirts of Trent and was told by an Italian officer that if it

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\textsuperscript{116} Kleiner, "Die letzten Tage des III. Korps," November 3, p. 16.
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\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. See also "Ereignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X.-4./XI. 1918," pp. 2, 5, and 6. Some British officers were very annoyed to find out that their allies had not told them that negotiations were under way.
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\textsuperscript{118} Baxa, Geschichte der k. u. k. Feidjägerbataillons No. 2, pp. 643-44.
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entered the city unarmed it would be given free passage through and
back to Austria. The regiment surrendered its weapons, only to be
met in the main square by a semicircle of machine guns. These men,
too, were taken prisoner. 119

Other units were more determined and/or more fortunate. Among
the fortunate units was the 79th Honvéd infantry brigade. When stop-
ped by an Italian detachment and told it was captured, a slight panic
broke out, along with some scattered shooting. At the first shots
the Italians disappeared and the brigade returned to Hungary without
hindrance. 120 The 41st and 51st Honvéd infantry divisions were stop-
ped in Maggio and told that they were prisoners. After three days of
fruitless negotiations they simply marched out of town. They had
kept their divisional artillery and were not bothered. When the
12th Schützen division was halted by an Italian bicycle company and
told to surrender, the divisional commander told the Italians he
would shoot them if they tried to stop the division from entering
Austria. The division returned home. 121

Everywhere the story was the same. Those units that had lost
cohesion or had given up their weapons were rounded up and herded

119 Ferdinand Schramm-Schiessl von Perstorff, Die Geschichte des
K. u. K. Mährischen Dragonerregimentes Friedrich Franz IV. Gross-
herzog von Mecklenburg-Schwerin Nr. 6, 1906-1918 (Vienna: Militär-
wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1933), pp. 1,076-77.

120 Szende, Die Ungarn im Zusammenbruch 1918, pp. 212-14.

121 "Bereignisse an der Südwestfront 24./X.-4./XI. 1918," 6th
Army, November 4, 1918, pp. 2-3. See also Szende, Die Ungarn im
Zusammenbruch 1918, pp. 208-10; and Bergmann, Am Niemandslande, p.
412. There were many more of these tales. As a general rule, those
units that kept their artillery and machine guns were the most for-
tunate; often they were not even halted.
into prisoner of war camps. Those units that had maintained their discipline and marched back fully armed were sometimes stopped, but if they refused to surrender they were allowed to continue on towards home.

Vittorio Veneto had given the Italians the victory that they had craved, but it was not so overwhelming as many Italian historians like to think; nor were the loss figures so overwhelming as they appear at first glance. Even by Italian admission most of the prisoners taken by the Entente forces were captured during the last twenty-four hours. Most estimates are that the Austrians lost 400,000 men in the period from October 24 to November 4. Of these, over 300,000 were "captured" between 1500 hours on November 3 and 1500 hours on November 4.122 Italian casualties for the battle were probably about 62,000 men.

The war was over but there was still no peace. The fighting had ended but disorder also proved to be an enemy. There were attempts to keep or restore some kind of order. Army Group Tirol tried to establish assembly areas for troops of the various nationalities, so that they could be sent home with little delay, but the effort was only partially successful.123 There were too few leaders

122 Oesterreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, Vol. VII, p. 758. Exact figures are, of course, nearly impossible to obtain due to the breakdown of the empire. The Italians claim between 300,000 and 483,000 Austrians captured. Since the total Austrian fighting strength on the Italian front was less than 260,000 men, most of those captured appear to have been service troops. Tragically, over 30,000 Austrians died in the Italian prison camps between November 1918 and their final release, many of them Czechs and Italians who were offered immediate freedom if they renounced their allegiance to the monarchy.

123 "Ereignisse an der Südwesterfront 24./XI.-4./XI. 1918," Army Group Tirol, November 4, 1918, pp. 4-5.
who cared. Many of those who did care had been captured along with their units. Some members of the Armeeoberkommando cared so little that all they could think of to do in the face of catastrophe was to sit in their offices and draft petitions for each other to be awarded the Maria Theresa cross for their efforts.¹²⁴

Many of the men who managed to return home did not face happy homecomings. It was the aftermath of war and defeat, and disorders in the homeland were common. The unfortunate town of Innichen was an example of the chaos that existed behind the front. It was one of the first towns of the homeland to be seen by the returning soldiers of the mountain armies and it presented a scene that was burned into the minds of the many soldiers who had to retreat through it. "Magyar soldiers stagger drunkenly in the street, shooting off flare pistols," reported one soldier. He continued "like the Bosnians, they have escaped from the authority of their officers and move from house to house, plundering."¹²⁵ But in truth, such actions were not limited to Hungarians and Bosnians. Although the filters of time and memory have led many German soldiers to assume that the Hungarians were the main troublemakers, the evidence is that Czechs, Germans, in fact, representatives of the whole monarchy also were engaged in the single-minded pillage of the small mountain city.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Windischgrätz, My Memoirs, pp. 303-05.

¹²⁵ Michel, Das Vierundachtzigerbuch, p. 259.

¹²⁶ See for example Rubint, Daten über das Verhalten der ungarischen Truppen beim Zusammenbruch, pp. 100 and 101-14; Rost, Feldjägerbataillon Kopal Nr. 10, p. 426; and Popper, Quer durch den Krieg, p. 243.
In the midst of the breakdown many of the army and army group commands continued to function, as did a large part of the Armeeoberkommando, providing some stability and continuity. Although the Armeeoberkommando kept up its protests to the Italians concerning the fate of the remaining Austro-Hungarian soldiers in Italy, the statements were perfunctory. Army Group Tirol had pointed out, in fact, that it might not be so bad to have the units still south of the Brenner taken prisoner. To be taken prisoner, the headquarters argued, was better than to return to the chaos of the homeland and starve—a likely alternative. If these men were prisoners, the Entente forces would become responsible for feeding them. The suggestion was a matter of reason, not of heart, and, considering the unexpected number of Austro-Hungarian soldiers that would die in Italian prison camps over the next year, it was not even reasonable. In any event, the Italians began to realize after only a few days that they could not handle and feed the bulk of the Austro-Hungarian army that had been caught south of the "front line," and they began to release the passing units, only requiring that they leave their weapons and equipment behind.

In Italy, an American journalist noted in his diary that "there is a sort of greediness in the air, very unpleasant after

127 See Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2159, November 9, 1918, pp. (655-56).

128 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2131, November 5, 1918, p. (597).

129 Kriegsarchiv (Vienna), Armeeoberkommando Secret Operations No. 2129, November 7, 1918, p. (586).
months of heroic daring and sacrifice." 130 In the Tirol, its inhabitants could only wait and see what the peace would bring them, Italian or Austrian rule. Along the various roads of northern Italy and in the Tirol stragglers and the remnants of once proud units of the Austro-Hungarian army either continued their weary march home or waited apathetically for incarceration in the Entente's prisons camps, where many more were to die without seeing home. There was a sort of poetic justice to the ending of the war in Italy, however. In 1914 events had escaped the control of the diplomats and politicians and led to a war they did not want and could not control. It was only fitting that the end of the war should do the same.

CHAPTER X

ALLI BELLA GERANT

All things tend to come full circle and finales are never so final and conclusive as one might think at the time. Only twenty-five years after 1918, under a different ruler and as part of a different "empire," the famous, old Hoch und Deutschmeister regiment was again in Italy. Now part of Hitler's Wehrmacht, it again fought in the hills and mountains of northern Italy against English and American troops. That episode, too, has ended. Now Austria is a neutral state, and it does not appear that the Austrian army will ever again make an appearance in Italy. But it did give one a shock to read a headline in a Viennese newspaper in the winter of 1975:

"Austrians and Italians battle at the Brenner." Such a headline did not entirely lose its poignancy when the reader discovered that the paper was referring only to a World Cup Ski Race. Again, events like the Tirolean Independence Movement's attempt to disrupt the 1976 Winter Olympics proved that the seeds of discontent still lie shallowly buried in the hearts of many people. Memories tend to be long in central and southern Europe.

The story of the Austro-Hungarian army in Italy in 1918 resembled a classical tragedy. During the twelve month period from
October 1917 to October 1918, the soldiers of the monarchy saw their greatest victory and the complete disintegration of the army and the country. From the Italian viewpoint, it was exactly the opposite. After the nearly mortal defeat at Caporetto and three years of bloody repulses along the Isonzo, the Italian soldiers rallied, clung to the Piave line, and finally achieved a measure of vindication during the Battle of Vittorio Veneto.

If seemingly inadequate attention has been paid to the Italian side of the campaigns of 1918 in this study, there are several reasons. First is the simple matter of topic. The focus of the study is on the Austro-Hungarian army itself rather than the war. Within this context, the Italians are of necessity treated as the somewhat shadowy menace on the other side of no man's land. To convey the story of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers and commanders, the Italian presence could and had to be treated rather summarily and then only when Italian actions directly impinged on the fate of the imperial and royal army.

A second factor affecting the treatment of the Italian story has been the matter of sources. In order to tell their story fully, a great deal of research would have to be conducted in the Italian archives. Unfortunately for the researcher who does not go into archival sources, Italian studies about the war are in general lamentably poor. There is some excuse for authors like Villari, writing shortly after the event, to engage in hyperbole and portray the Italian effort in the best possible light. As has been obvious, many Austrian authors attempted to do the same for their own cause; it is a problem endemic to his. military history in particular.
While most countries have come around to a more balanced viewpoint of their involvement in the First World War, Italian authors have been for the large part content to repeat the same old clichés. The Austrian, English, and French official histories of the campaign in Italy agree on most points, including strength estimates. Once the documents of the old Austro-Hungarian war ministry and Armeeoberkommando became available, this consensus was only natural. The partisanship of historical writing on the Italian side has not, however, changed to a significant degree. The articles done by Italian authors for Barry Pitt's *History of the First World War* and the Italian general staff's anniversary study of the June Battles and Battle of Vittorio Veneto have merely repeated the errors of the earliest authors. The official English *History of the Great War* went so far in condemning the efforts of the Italian official history as to show that the independently written English and Austrian accounts of a particular action agreed in great detail, while the Italian version tried to ignore the fact that the British played a major part in the encounter.

The most unfortunate victim of Italian historical vainglory has probably been the Italian soldier. Often he fought well and bravely, in spite of poor leadership, but since the descriptions of his conduct in Italian secondary sources so often approach parody, and since the only other accounts were written by equally biased wartime authors or by his enemies, his accomplishments are in danger of being forgotten. And for anyone to belittle the Italian soldiers' efforts is to ignore the fortitude that was necessary to return to the attack repeatedly during the Eleven Battles of the Isonzo.
Another unfortunate victim of most accounts of the First World War has been the Austro-Hungarian soldier. His problem was that he was continually being compared with the German soldier. There is no doubt that the German soldier was better trained, better equipped, better educated, and better led than the Austro-Hungarian trooper. All of this did not make the Austro-Hungarian soldier a bad soldier. Many of the problems were simply those inherent in a multinational and multilingual army. In their memoirs, many German generals have belittled the monarchy's army with repeated references to the number of times that Germany had to come to its aid. Such accounts tend to ignore the fact that the monarchy was fighting a war on three fronts and that it was containing a larger part of the Russian army during the first months of the war than the German forces. They also ignore the number of times the Germans begged the monarchy to send some of the Austrian mountain units to the Western Front because they frankly admitted that the Austrians were their superiors in mountain combat. In front of the Belgian forts and at Verdun the Germans were happy to have the big Skoda howitzers.

Such general evaluations of the Austro-Hungarian army during 1918 reveal several factors. First, the army was not so bad as it has been portrayed. It did not consist of 3,000,000 good soldiers Švejk. After the destruction of the regular army units in Russia during the first months of the war, the imperial and royal army was largely a conscript force. Under these circumstances, all of the weaknesses and flaws of the empire itself should have been expected to appear earlier than they did. If the army had lived up to the stereotyped picture of it, nationalism and disloyalty to the empire
should have quickly become rampant in its ranks. This did not occur. Aside from a few instances of mutiny on the Russian front early in the war, the army behaved quite steadfastly.

Under the strains of the first prolonged "modern" war, the Russian army collapsed and the majority of the French army mutinied in 1917. The Italian army nearly suffered a similar catastrophic disintegration during and after Caporetto. Only in 1918, after a winter of near starvation, did the Austro-Hungarian army begin to show large-scale cracks in its morale. But the reason for the loss of morale was not the presence of nationalistic antagonisms but sheer war-weariness. Only in late 1918, after the empire itself had broken up, did nationalism cause major rifts among the soldiers.

The collapse of the army at Vittorio Veneto did not cause the end of the empire, but rather the previous disintegration of the empire caused the army to fall apart. The army had remained a prop of the empire and defended it as long as the empire itself existed. The question of whether the empire could have or would have been saved under other circumstances is a rather academic question. The problem was that by 1918 the monarchy could only be saved by a victory in the field (and even this would have been a long-shot chance). At Caporetto the Armeeoberkommando got an inkling that victory was possible, but failure in planning and leadership during the June Battles made long-range victory impossible. After the June Battles the monarchy could only hope for a quick peace. Caught between the Entente's unwillingness to accept any solution to the war that did not also include Germany and German unwillingness to concede victory, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was doomed to fight a war that was
unwinnable. And the longer the fighting went on the slimmer were
the chances that the empire would survive the war.

It was not inevitable, however, that the army would collapse
in October of 1918. If it had been able to hold out, a more just
peace would have been possible. Any eventualities other that what
actually occurred were precluded by the emperor Charles. Although
Charles was an intelligent, sensitive, and well-meaning man, he was
out of place as a war leader of a beleaguered nation. From the
time he assumed the throne, his actions were counterproductive. His
first major mistake was to take over direct command of the army.
He had good reasons for wishing to do so, but it was a job which he
was unqualified to undertake. By assuming the command, Charles
ensured that the mistakes of the army would be identified as mistakes
of the emperor—a serious error in dynastic terms. Once he was com-
mmander of the army, he still might have become moderately successful
if he had had a competent chief of staff. His dismissal of Conrad
was perhaps necessary since the field marshal was a man who could
not be swayed from his own strategic goals—even by an emperor.
Still, Conrad had the redeeming grace of being self-confident. It
is a necessary component of the character of a chief of staff which
his successor did not have.

Arz's appointment as chief of staff was truly a decisive
moment in the decline of the monarchy. A brilliant man, with an
equally brilliant aide in Waldstätten, Arz was unqualified for his
post. He had been a good corps commander and theoretical general,
but as chief of staff he was in water above his head. It was not a
question of there being no one better qualified to take the chief of
staff post. Dankl, Böhm-Ermolli, Krauß, and possibly several others would have been far better choices. Arz's redeeming feature from the emperor's point of view was that he would always defer to his monarch.

Since Arz had neither the strength of character nor the reputation to order around men like Conrad and Boroević, he and Waldstätten attempted to lead by subterfuge. They and their alter ego, the Armeeoberkommando, tried to operate by telling everyone only what he wanted to hear. They would not give a decisive "no" answer to anybody. With this failure of real leadership at the top, there was really no hope for coordinated planning or action on the part of the army itself. The botched attempt to agree to a plan of battle for the June offensive was an excellent demonstration of the weaknesses of this system.

The common soldiers of the army had suffered terribly during the early part of 1918, but they persevered until the June Battle. With the fate of the army and empire dependent on the outcome, the battles were lost. Victory might not have given ultimate success to the monarchy, but it might have enabled it to survive. The defeat in the battle simply assured the end of the empire. When it would occur and how complete it would be were the only remaining questions. Their answer depended on whether or not the soldiers could remain steadfast. The answer, as it turned out, was "no" and the whole chain of events in Italy after July 1, 1918, was in actuality merely a denouement; the question no longer needed asking. The completeness of the collapse when it came, however, was a surprise. No single circumstance was decisive, but their totality was.
Probably the single most important contributing factor to the end of Austria-Hungary was the fall of Bulgaria. It came swiftly and caught the Armeoberkommando completely off-guard. The advance of the Allied armies through the Balkans towards the Hungarian border came at a time when the Armeoberkommando had absolutely no Hungarian units stationed in the Balkans or in southern Hungary. This was naturally a matter of great concern to both Hungarian politicians and soldiers. Austria-Hungary's only hope for survival at this point was to secure a rapid peace before the threat to Hungary became so great as to cause it to desert the empire. They failed to secure this peace, but even their attempt was founded on illusions.

Emperor Charles' belief that Wilson would adhere to all of his Fourteen Points induced Austria-Hungary to make a direct bid for an armistice in October. To give bona-fide proof of the monarchy's willingness to abide by all of Wilson's demands, Charles issued his October Manifesto. The manifesto basically promised self-determination to the peoples of the empire. The response of the politicians and peoples was unexpected. Charles and Arz had hoped that people would take the manifesto as a promise of improvements after the war. But the politicians were unwilling to wait. Without any formal votes or plebiscites, most of the national leaders merely declared their nations independent and set themselves up as the ruling parties. In order to guarantee their "independence" primarily against the conflicting claims of the other "independent" states, each nationality called upon the soldiers of the nation to return and defend their homeland.
The threat from the Entente advance against Hungary and these pleas from the national governments put the ordinary soldiers of the empire into a moral dilemma. Whom should they obey? Where did their true duty lie? Should they return and defend their homes, or were their commanders truthful when they told them that they could defend their homelands best by remaining and fighting on the Piave.

In the midst of this confusion and uncertainty, an event occurred that effectively destroyed the Austro-Hungarian army: Wilson rejected the monarchy's peace proposal. The Austrians had forgotten that America's allies could be just as much a hindrance to American ideals of peace as Germany was to Austria-Hungary's. This rejection, combined with the call of the national governments for their soldiers to return home, proved to be the catalyst of dissolution. Mutinies broke out from Odessa to the Tirol. Unit after unit decided that its loyalty lay with the new homeland rather than the disintegrating monarchy. With half the Austro-Hungarian army in rebellion or marching to the rear, the Italians launched their autumn offensive. The results demonstrated what would have happened if the Germans had attacked during the midst of the French mutinies of the previous year.

The evidence indicates that the Italian offensive was a spur of the moment affair, undertaken only after the collapse of Bulgaria. Its planning and preparations were carried out with great haste, and the battle itself was launched at the earliest possible moment. Despite all of the advantages that the Italians had going for them, the offensive was initially stymied in the mountains; but the fight for the Grappa Massif was probably more a battle for survival than for empire. When the English and French corps broke the defensive
line along the Piave a few days later, the battle was lost. The army could only retreat and hope for peace.

Under the pressure of events, the Austro-Hungarian delegation that attempted to arrange an armistice did as well as it could, but its position was hopeless. The Austrians had nothing to bargain with, while the Italians were hot on the scent of victory. Again, ineptitude on the part of Arz magnified the tragedy of defeat. His order to the Austro-Hungarian army to cease fire before the enemy was aware that the monarchy was going to accept its terms merely condemned large portions of the army to imprisonment and death.

If there is anything such as a moral to this story, it is that intelligence and good intentions are sometimes inadequate to deal with the realities of the world and of war. Victory was a questionable goal for the empire in 1918, but it was a goal which it was forced to try for. Poor leadership on the part of the emperor, Arz, and Waldstätten magnified the failings of the army leadership as a whole. The one goal that the army could strive for with a hope of success was survival for both itself and its empire; this was denied to it by the misdirected good intentions and bad judgments of its superiors.

The defeated army, as well as the empire and dynasty which it tried to defend, paid the price of failure—they disappeared. With the Carthagians they can testify that force does settle some things.
APPENDIX A
COMPARATIVE RANKS

Feldmarschall  General of the Armies
General-Oberst  General
General der (Kavalerie,  Lt. General
Artillerie, Infanterie)
Feldmarschalleutnant  Major General
General-Major  Brigadier General
Oberst  Colonel
Oberstleutnant  Lt. Colonel
Major  Major
Hauptmann  Captain
Oberleutnant  First Lieutenant
Leutnant  Lieutenant

As a general rule, I have translated all Austrian ranks into their American equivalents. There are two exceptions to this. First, field marshal has been left as is because it is a familiar term to American readers and also because it is not a precise equivalent to the American rank. Second, I have left general of the (artillery, cavalry, and infantry) in its Austrian form because it is more descriptive than the American rank equivalent.
APPENDIX B

CHRONOLOGY OF MUTINIES

October 10
313th Honvéd Infantry Regiment

October 15
20th Schützen Regiment

October 20
3rd Jäger Battalion

October 21
13th Uhlan Regiment
69th Infantry Regiment

October 22
3/27th Landwehr Infantry Regiment
2/4th Field Artillery Regiment

October 23
79th Infantry Regiment (march company)
25th Honvéd Infantry Regiment
26th Honvéd Infantry Regiment
30th Storm Battalion
18th Infantry Regiment
2/27th Jäger Battalion
4th Bosnia-Herzegovinan Infantry Regiment
39th Infantry Regiment (march company)
7th Bosnia-Herzegovinan Infantry Regiment

October 24
79th Infantry Regiment
130th Infantry Regiment
138th Infantry Regiment
2nd Infantry Regiment
41st Infantry Regiment
27th Jäger Battalion
28th Jäger Battalion
28th Schützen Regiment
8th Schützen Regiment
7th Schützen Regiment
25th Schützen Regiment
2nd Gebirgschützen Regiment
38th Honvéd Infantry Division
October 25

69th Infantry Regiment
2 companies of the Vienna Garrison
25th Infantry Regiment
22nd Infantry Regiment
5th Hungarian Landsturm Infantry Regiment
40th Honvéd Infantry Division

October 26

49th Infantry Division
34th Infantry Regiment
85th Infantry Regiment
11th Honvéd Infantry Regiment
18th Division
5th Infantry Division
16th Infantry Division

October 27

77th Infantry Regiment
2nd Mountain Artillery Regiment
26th Heavy Artillery Regiment
14th Schützen Regiment
68th Infantry Regiment
30th Schützen Regiment
24th Jäger Battalion

October 28

26th Schützen Division
86th Schützen Brigade
29th Infantry Division
201st Landsturm Infantry Brigade
1st Schützen Regiment
119th Infantry Regiment
6th Infantry Regiment
105th Infantry Regiment
57th Infantry Regiment
122nd Infantry Regiment
32nd Jäger Battalion
7th Infantry Division (except for 68th Infantry Regiment)
43rd Schützen Division
28th Infantry Division
3/4th Kaiserjäger Regiment
103rd Infantry Regiment
42nd Infantry Regiment
26th Infantry Regiment
3rd Infantry Regiment

This list has been compiled from a number of sources and is not meant to be exhaustive, merely to demonstrate the approximate dates and magnitude of the mutinies in the Austro-Hungarian army.
## APPENDIX D
### ARMISTICE CHRONOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 28, 1918</td>
<td></td>
<td>Armeeoberkommando orders Weber's commission to initiate talks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 29, 1918</td>
<td>0900</td>
<td>Captain Ruggera enters Italian lines and delivers letter to the Italians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 30, 1918</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Captain Ruggera returns to Austrian lines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1730</td>
<td>General Weber enters Italian lines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 31, 1918</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Austrian negotiating commission arrives at Villa Giusti.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1, 1918</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>General Badoglio gives preliminary draft of Terms to the Austrians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1445</td>
<td>Captain Ruggera and Colonel Schneller return to Trent with dispatches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2, 1918</td>
<td>0500</td>
<td>Prince Lichtenstein returns to Trent and learns that the Austro-Hungarian fleet has been given to the Yugoslavs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>Weber receives original text of terms from the Entente; informs Armeeoberkommando of ultimatum that terms must be accepted by midnight of November 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 3, 1918</td>
<td>0300</td>
<td>Commission ends negotiating session at Villa Giusti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0120</td>
<td>Arz orders Austro-Hungarian army to cease hostilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0230</td>
<td>Arz attempts to recall ceasefire order.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
0200-0500 Arz informed that armies in Italy cannot recall the ceasefire order.

0300 Emperor Charles resigns as Army Supreme Commander and appoints Arz to replace him.

0900 Arz makes a new attempt to get acquiescence of parliament to the armistice.

1500 Armistice signed

1830 Weber informs Armeooberkommando of protocol specifying a twenty-four delay before cessation of hostilities.

November 4, 1918 "morning" First protest to Italians against the continuation of fighting and the taking of prisoners.

1500 Armistice takes effect.

This Chronology has been based primarily on that of Captain Ruggera who was a member of the negotiating commission. See his work, "Der Waffenstillstand 1918" for further information.
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