

The Eastern and Southern Fronts 1914-17

POINTS TO CONSIDER

This chapter moves from the Western Front to other areas of the war. It should help to explain how the various fronts affected each other. The important question for students is, for war leaders at the time, whether they or the other fronts was the 'gallia'. He was not from this also interesting to compare the experience of soldiers in these widely differing features of war.

KEY DATES

- 1914** Austrian campaign against Serbia begins
Defeat of Russia in East Prussia
Turkey's Caucasus campaign begins
- 1915** Gallipoli campaign against Turkey begins
Bulgaria's entry into the war
Armenian massacres begin
Italy's entry into the war
Four Battles of the Isonzo
Defeat of Russia in Galicia
Defeat of Serbia
Chantilly Conference of Allies
Allied evacuation of Gallipoli completed
Five Battles of the Isonzo
British surrender at Kut
Austrian offensive in the Dolomites
Brusilov offensive against Austria begins
Romania's entry into the war
March Revolution in Russia
Entry of Greece into the war
Allenby's campaign in Palestine begins
Lawrence of Arabia's guerrilla campaign
November Revolution in Russia
Austrian breakthrough at Caporetto
British capture of Jerusalem
Russian armistice
Romanian cease-fire
- 1917**

Introduction

While Belgians fled from villages burned by the Kaiser's advancing forces in August 1914, Germans themselves were made homeless by two Russian armies invading the area of their country known as East Prussia. The sight of refugees bringing pramloads of possessions and barefoot children into Berlin presented the German government with a dilemma: should it concentrate all its efforts on defeating France or should it jeopardise the Schlieffen Plan by sending troops to halt the Russian invasion?

Such difficult choices confounded all the major belligerents over the next three years. Austria-Hungary dithered disastrously between dealing with Serbia and Italy to the south and contending against Russia to the north-east; Russia had to send out armies against Germany, Austria and Turkey; Britain and France were torn between the Western Front's need for more men and supplies and appeals for relief from their hard-pressed ally. When various Balkan countries entered the war, still more fronts were opened up and harassed wartime leaders struggled to keep abreast of the different areas of fighting.

Halting the 'Steam-roller': The Russian Fronts

KEY ISSUE What factors led to the defeat and eventual collapse of Russia?

a) Battles in East Prussia and Galicia 1914-15

On 19 August 1914 General Prittwitz, the German Commander in East Prussia, made a frantic telephone call to Berlin. He warned that he could not resist the First and Second Russian Armies moving to the north and south of the Masurian lakes and that he would have to retreat. It was only when the German Commander-in-Chief sent Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff to take over his command that the outnumbered German forces were able to outmanoeuvre an enemy which was utterly unprepared for modern warfare. Undetected by incompetent Russian intelligence, Ludendorff surrounded General Samsonov's Second Army to the south of the lakes and soundly defeated it near the village of Tannenberg on 27-30 August. 90,000 bewildered Russian soldiers gave themselves up and further tens of thousands retreated in disarray over the Russian border. German soldiers searching the forests for booty (guns, horses and equipment which filled 60 trains) found the body of General Samsonov, who had shot himself in the head rather than face the Tsar after such a humiliating defeat.

With communications in complete disorder, the First Russian Army, 50 miles away to the north of the lakes, had been unable to prevent this disaster. It held out until early September, when two extra divisions sent over from the Western Front gave the Germans superiority. Between 7 and 13 September, in the Battle of the Masurian Lakes, Hindenburg pushed the Russians back over the frontier and by the end of the year he had gained a secure hold over East Prussia. This campaign had cost over 100,000 German casualties. The Russian army had also suffered huge losses. The fact that it had contributed to the failure of the Schlieffen Plan was probably not much comfort to its peasant soldiers, many of whom lacked overcoats, boots and adequate rations.

Further south, in the Polish-speaking borderlands of Austria-Hungary and Russia, an even more confused conflict was taking place. Austria's Chief of Staff, Count Conrad von Hötendorf, sent troops into Galicia in August, with no clear idea of what they were meant to achieve. Encountering superior numbers of Russian soldiers, they were defeated in battles in the region of Lemberg. By October Austria had given up 150 miles of territory and 100,000 prisoners. Further retreat was only prevented by the arrival of German troops under General Falkenhayn. Over the winter 'men froze and starved amid the steep valleys and forests' of the Carpathian mountains.¹ Keegan applies this description only to the Austrians but in fact it is difficult to say which army suffered more.

Fighting resumed in January 1915 with a joint German-Austrian offensive in January aimed at the final defeat of Russia. The Russians counter-attacked but when German reinforcements arrived in the spring the overloaded Russian transport system could not bring up sufficient reserves to match them. By this time, too, the Russian shell-shortage was so acute that guns were limited to ten shots a day. Florence Farmborough, an English nurse serving on the Russian front, recorded in her diary: 'Whole regiments are said to be without a cartridge and only a certain number of batteries can continue the shelling.'² In May and June Russia was defeated in the extended Battle of Gorlice and forced to retreat from Galicia. German troops also invaded Russian Poland and took Warsaw on 5 August - 'a breathtaking spectacle'.³

Historians such as Norman Stone and Orlando Figes draw attention to the poor state of the Russian army at this stage. Written evidence is sparse because so many soldiers were illiterate and letters were strictly censored. The readiness with which men surrendered to the enemy, long sick-lists and the frequency of self-inflicted injury attest, however, to the 'widespread demoralisation of the army'.⁴ Figes identifies the occasion of this retreat as a 'vital psychological moment' and quotes from the diary of Dmitry Os'kin, a literate peasant who had become a platoon commander:

What are we doing in this war? Several hundred men have already passed through my platoon alone and at least half of them have ended up on the fields of battle either killed or wounded. What will they get at the end of the war?⁵

Nevertheless, in spite of losing 75,000 casualties and retreating 250 miles, Russia was able to fight on once its armies had been reorganised and re-equipped. Britain and France were at that time trying to relieve the pressure on their ally by taking on Turkey in Gallipoli (see pages 57-60). It is also worth noting that these campaigns had severely damaged the Austrian army, which could no longer manage without German help. Its rates of desertion and surrender were proportionately higher than Russia's because of the disloyalty of non-German-speaking troops, who resented their cruel treatment and poor rations.

When Tsar Nicholas II unwisely assumed supreme command of the Russian army in August 1915 the outcome of the war in eastern Europe still hung in the balance. Diplomatic efforts by the Central Powers to conclude a separate peace with Russia in the course of the year met with no response.

b) The Brusilov Offensive 1916

At a conference held at Chantilly in France in December 1915 Britain, France, Italy and Russia decided to co-ordinate their strategy: all four countries were to make simultaneous attacks on the Central Powers. Russia's role was to launch first a major offensive against Germany and then a minor one against Austria. Such plans proved easier to make than to carry out.

It is true that a gigantic industrial effort had resulted in thousand-fold increases in Russia's production of war materials between August 1914 and early 1916. There was no longer a shell-shortage, though commanding officers continued to use it as an excuse for failure or inaction. Since Russia still had the largest army in Europe, in spite of difficulties with conscription, there seemed no reason for its not carrying out the promise made at Chantilly. Once Germany had begun its onslaught on Verdun in February the French urged quick action. The result was an ill-planned offensive on Russia's north-west front during the March thaw of 1916; waves of Russian infantry were mown down by German artillery for no gain at all. Most Russian officers (many of whom were elderly) had now lost the will to attack.

One who was still determined to prove Russia's worth as an ally was General Brusilov. An intelligent commander who made tireless efforts to improve the conditions of his men, he is considered by most historians to be Russia's most successful First-World War leader. Despite having fewer men and supplies than his colleagues in the north-west, he was keen to press ahead with an attack on Austria-Hungary. After carefully concealed preparations and with unprecedented co-ordination between artillery and infantry, he carried this out all along the

Galician front in June. By August he had won one of the greatest victories of the war, regaining much of the territory lost in 1915 and dealing an irreparable blow to the Austrian army. Eiges believes that this battle could have changed the course of the war had it not been for 'military stupidity'.⁶ Considering it a side-show, the government sent no reserves to make up for the million casualties it had cost. Thus all Brusilov's gains had to be relinquished in the face of counter-attacks organised by Hindenburg later in the year.

Nevertheless, the offensive had profound effects. It helped to save Verdun by causing German reinforcements to be diverted from the Western Front; it contributed to Romania's decision to enter the war on the side of the Allies; and it brought the Austrian army close to collapse. Brusilov became a hero in Europe, although his reputation in Russia seemed less secure. He recorded that he regularly received anonymous letters from his own soldiers warning 'that they did not want any more fighting, and that if peace was not concluded shortly, I should be killed.'⁷

c) The Collapse of Russia 1917

The despair expressed by Russian soldiers sounds similar to that which caused mutiny in the French army in 1917. Troops of both nations anguished about bad conditions and irregular leave, expressed concern for the plight of their families and longed for peace. Why is it that the Russian army collapsed in July 1917 while the French was pacified by Pétain's concessions?

The crucial factor was the state of the Russian economy. The industrial boom generated by the war solved the shell-shortage but in doing so it created massive inflation. The most serious effect of this was that peasants hoarded their grain rather than selling it for devalued money. The inadequate supplies released were sporadically distributed by a transport system which could not cope with the demands of the war. Soldiers waiting for their rations at the front or in barracks were as easy a prey for revolutionary propaganda as civilians queueing for bread in the cities; the government's ban on vodka sales inflamed passions still further. When the people of Petrograd (as St. Petersburg had been named) rose against the Tsar in March 1917 the Petrograd garrison refused to defend him and he quickly fell from power.

The Provisional Government which now took control decided to continue with the war and appointed Brusilov as Commander-in-Chief. But not all soldiers were enthusiastic about a renewed war effort even under more popular leadership. Many were more influenced by the Petrograd Soviet (workers' council), whose famous 'Order Number One' gave soldiers the rights of citizens when they were not on military duty, established soviets in the ranks, introduced democratic forms of address and declared that troops should carry out government orders only if they did not conflict with those of the

Soviet. Brusilov blamed this 'accursed' document for destroying the discipline of the army.⁸ Florence Farmborough was surprised to find that 'soldiers can now sit - even smoke - in the presence of their officers'.⁹

Nevertheless, Brusilov at first supported the decision taken by Alexander Kerensky, the new Minister of War, to launch a summer offensive. But when 'Mr General' (as Brusilov had now to be called) visited the front lines he found the troops disaffected and hostile to the idea of a new attack. 'If we take a mountain, there is always another one in front of us, and there is no profit in it', one soldier grumbled. In spite of Brusilov's doubts, the offensive took place on 1 July but it foundered after a couple of weeks. An English observer remembers that many men 'hid in the woods and only returned when they were sure that the fighting was over'.¹⁰ Few battalions were as loyal as the 'battalion of death' made up of women led by Maria Botchkareva. Russian troops now retreated in a headlong rush from the front lines, denuding the countryside of anything which might provide sustenance for the German and Austro-Hungarian forces who pursued them far beyond the frontier. Russia's combatant role was now over, after 'three years of merciless, senseless slaughter'. It is hard to disagree with the Bolshevik writer, Maxim Gorky, who attributes the cruelty often shown by his fellow-revolutionaries to the brutalizing effects of 'this bloody nightmare'.¹¹

No official armistice was made until December, after Lenin's Bolshevik party had seized power. At the opening of formal peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk on 22 December the chief German delegate thought it auspicious that they were beginning 'in sight of that festival which for many centuries has promised peace on earth and good will towards men'.¹² More heartfelt was the Germans' hope that after Christmas they would be able to send most of their troops to fight on the Western Front.

Dealing with the 'Minor Powers': Turkey and the Balkans

KEY ISSUE Why did fighting in the Balkans and Turkey continue for so long?

a) The Gallipoli Campaign 1915

'Let me bring my lads face to face with Turks in the open field', wrote General Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander of Britain's army in Gallipoli. 'We must beat them every time because British volunteer soldiers are superior individuals to Anatolians, Syrians and Arabs and are animated with a superior idea.'¹³ This attitude is typical of the arrogance

with which the 'Great Powers' assumed that they could easily defeat weaker or smaller countries. In fact Turkey and the Balkan nations often presented unexpected obstacles both to the Allies and to the Central Powers.

In spite of its serious recruitment problems and a woefully inadequate communications system, Turkey created major difficulties for the Allies after it entered the war in October 1914. By blockading the Dardanelles Straits Turkey prevented British and French help from reaching Russia, by threatening British trade interests around the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal it forced Britain to keep garrisons in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Egypt, and by attacking Russia in the Caucasus Mountains it drew Russian troops away from Eastern Europe. As it happened, Turkey's foolhardy winter campaign in the Caucasus resulted in a decisive Russian victory. This setback seems to have prompted the Ottoman government's horrifying genocide of its Armenian subjects, whom they suspected of being disloyal and a potential help to the enemy. Between April 1915 and December 1917 Armenians in towns like Trebizond were massacred and thousands more were marched into the desert where they died of starvation and thirst. Nearly 700,000 men, women and children disappeared in the first 'ethnic cleansing' of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile the Allies had embarked in 1915 on a venture which proved to be as ill-judged as Turkey's Caucasus campaign. Anxious to respond to Russia's appeals for help, desperate to find an alternative to the Western Front stalemate and hoping to attract new allies in the Balkans, the British War Council hesitantly adopted the idea of a Dardanelles offensive championed by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. Even though the Navy would spare only some of its older vessels (apart from the 'super-Dreadnought' *Queen Elizabeth*), Churchill was confident that Constantinople could be taken 'by ships alone'. After bombardment of Turkish shore defences, 16 British and French battleships advanced into the Dardanelles on 18 March. At the end of the day, during which three ships had been sunk and a further three put out of action by undetected Turkish mines, the fleet commander, Admiral de Robeck, abandoned the operation. For weeks Churchill urged the renewal of the naval plan but instead he was blamed for its failure and forced to leave the Admiralty.

A plan was now improvised to land troops on Turkey's Gallipoli peninsula, to the north of the Straits. War Secretary Lord Kitchener, who did not consider the Turks a serious enemy, would allow only one division to leave the Western Front; apart from that, the 30,000 Australians and New Zealanders currently training in Egypt would be 'quite good enough'.¹⁴ Hasty and inadequate though the preparations were, they were not complete until 25 April. By this time the Turks were ready too. On the morning of that day, after bombardment from the sea, various landing parties struggled to shore: a French diversionary force at Kum Kale on the Asiatic coast, British

regiments on the beaches at the tip of the peninsula (Cape Helles) and the Anzacs (as the Australian and New Zealand troops were nicknamed) ten miles away at Caba Tepe - or 'Anzac Bay'. The Turks were greatly outnumbered but because they held the steep slopes and cliffs above the beaches they could slaughter the enemy as they landed. 'All day long', wrote an Australian Captain, 'we were losing cobsers [mates] and stretcher bearers were kept busy.' By the end of that day at least 4,000 out of the 30,000 who landed had fallen. Over the ensuing months troops fought to gain more than a foothold but Turkish counter-attacks prevented them from penetrating further than a few miles. In August, after reinforcements had arrived, a new landing was made at Suvla Bay further north. But General Stopford, 'an officer of advanced years and vacillating disposition',¹⁵ failed to press forward when the Turks were initially taken by surprise; here too a deadly stalemate resulted.

By this time the Turkish forces had also been augmented and the two sides were evenly matched. Furthermore, the Turks were ably led by the German General Liman von Sanders and by a gifted young Ottoman commander, Mustapha Kemal, who inspired his men to fight courageously even when they lacked ammunition. British, French and Anzac soldiers also behaved with great heroism - but the leadership given by General Hamilton, who directed the campaign from his ship, was less dynamic than Kemal's. As well as the misjudgements made by Hamilton and his subordinates, the troops had to endure an unbearably hot summer and an acute shortage of water supplies, the combination of which caused thousands to die of dysentery. For Private Ernest Lye the campaign was 'a terrible nightmare that I shall remember as long as I live'. Many of his fellow-soldiers must have felt the same but here, as on the Western Front, humour and comradeship kept men going. An Australian soldier explains how they carried on:

In the Diggers we just trusted each other blind and while one bloke stayed there he could bet his sweet life that the other mate was going to be with him and that if we went we'd all go together.

Eventually, in October, Hamilton was relieved of his command; his successor, Sir Charles Monro, recommended the evacuation of the peninsula 'on purely military grounds, in consequence of the grave daily wastage of officers and men'.¹⁶ The War Council did not finally decide on withdrawal until early December, by which time a ferocious blizzard had caused hundreds of soldiers to freeze to death or drown in floods. Churchill had already resigned from the government in protest against his colleagues' lack of commitment to the campaign. Between 30 December and 8 January all surviving troops and their equipment were evacuated; they left behind the remains of those who had died - 28,000 British, 10,000 French, 7,500 Australians and 2,250 New Zealanders. It is true that about 55,000 of the best Turkish troops

had also perished, but at least the Turks could claim victory over the European invader.

Mustapha Kemal, who later became leader of Turkey, dedicated the peninsula as a memorial park. It is much visited by Australians, who remember this campaign with a mixture of pride and bitterness. It was not an episode of which the British government could be proud. Although some historians argue that the campaign came close to success, it is difficult to see how anything but a much greater commitment of planning, men and resources could have defeated Turkey at this time and place. Here was not an enemy which could be knocked out in a side-show.

b) The Balkans

One aim of the Gallipoli campaign had been to give support to Serbia, which was still unconquered. Three Austro-Hungarian armies had invaded on 12 August 1914, confident that they would force the Serbs to recognize Austria-Hungary's mastery. The Serbs were outnumbered and at first taken off guard but General Putnik rushed reinforcements forward and soon pushed the invaders back over the borders. In September Austrian forces invaded a second time, although they had to be bullied into battle. Belgrade fell but the Serbs, now receiving supplies from the west, counter-attacked, regained their capital and freed the country of Austrian troops by the end of the year. In the process, however, 100,000 Serb soldiers were killed and a typhus epidemic subsequently claimed many more lives.

In 1915 Germany decided to assist in the conquest of this recalcitrant country, which blocked its communications with Turkey. The German government was also negotiating for an alliance with Bulgaria, designed to encircle Serbia. Once the Gallipoli campaign had begun to falter, in September, Bulgaria threw in its lot with the Central Powers, on condition that it would receive Macedonia (southern Serbia) as well as some Turkish territory. In October 600,000 German, Austrian and Bulgarian troops overran Serbia. The remnant of its army and thousands of civilian refugees retreated across the Albanian mountains, where they were beset by hostile local tribes. Enemy aeroplanes, severe winter weather, hunger and disease made their plight worse. The soldiers reached safety on the island of Corfu where they awaited the opportunity to free their country. 'For sheer heroism and endurance the Serbian retreat has few equals', concludes one historian.¹⁷

Bulgarian forces now established a strong position in the mountains of Macedonia. Among the Allied troops who were landed in the northern Greek province of Salonika to dislodge them was Private N.C. Powell, who describes the dangers of fighting in this land of 'untamed' beauty: 'Johnny Bulgar treated us to many displays of accurate shooting with trench mortars, grenades, machine guns and a few

personal visits; these, coupled with malaria, played havoc amongst us.¹⁸ Bulgaria kept the Allies busy on the Salonika front until October 1918.

The third Balkan country to enter the fray was Romania. During the successful Brusilov offensive of August 1916 it was enticed to join the Allies with promises of Austrian land. It was soon attacked, however, by its hostile neighbours; by December German, Austrian and Bulgarian forces had overrun most of the country, including its oil-fields and grain reserves which now helped to supplement Germany's dwindling resources. Russian troops diverted from Galicia had been unable to prevent this disaster. Romanian counter-attacks in 1917 achieved some success but Russia's collapse left Romania isolated and a cease-fire was arranged at the end of the year.

By this time Greece had at last joined the Allies. For three years Greeks had been split between the German-educated King Constantine, who wanted to keep his country neutral, and the liberal politician, Eleutherios Venizelos, who favoured intervention. The King had been unable to prevent the Allies from using Salonika as a base for their campaign against Bulgaria. Eventually, with Anglo-French support, Venizelos formed a government and forced the King into exile. He committed Greece to the Allies in June 1917 but brought them no immediate advantage as mobilisation was not complete until April 1918. At the end of 1917 the Central Powers were still dominant in South-Eastern Europe.

c) The Desert War

After the Allies withdrew from Gallipoli the Turks transferred troops to their Arab province of Mesopotamia. They had been holding British and Indian forces under siege at Kut since December 1915 and had overcome all attempts to relieve the city. By April 1916 the besieged were reduced to eating horses or taking opium pills to reduce hunger. At the end of the month they surrendered to the Turks, who took them on a forced march to prisoner-of-war camps in Anatolia. During this 'saga of pain and death' 2,500 Indian and 1,250 British troops died.¹⁹

The combined effects of defeat, bad climatic conditions, exhaustion and inadequate supplies lowered morale among Allied troops remaining in Mesopotamia. This was especially true in the Indian regiments where desertion and malingering were common. 'They are not fighting with much keenness and are rather homesick', concluded one army report.²⁰ The Chief Medical Officer blamed their malaise on deficient rations which led to a high rate of scurvy. Indian troops' provisions were only about a quarter of those of British soldiers and were particularly lacking in fresh meat and vegetables. With an improved diet (including 250 gallons a day of fresh lime juice shipped from India), their health and fighting efficiency began to

improve in 1917. In February of that year the British recaptured Kut and then advanced to take Baghdad in March. They had gained ascendancy over the Turks in Mesopotamia, but had needed 200,000 men to do it.

Lest the Turks should try to retake Baghdad, the British government sent General Allenby to fight them in Palestine. It was also thought that a victory in the Holy Land would boost Allied morale. In addition Anglo-French imperialist ambitions would reap rewards in the Middle East as outlined in the Sykes-Picot Plan (see page 20). The force which Allenby had at his disposal in June 1917 consisted of experienced British and Anzac cavalry and infantry divisions with good air support. He also had guerrilla assistance from the anti-Turkish Arab Movement organised by Captain T.E. Lawrence (known as Lawrence of Arabia) and Sharif Hussain of Mecca, who had been given vague British assurances of Arab independence. In November, however, this accord with the Arabs was jeopardized by the Balfour Declaration, giving British support to the idea that Palestine would become a 'national home' for the Jews.

Allenby 'had learnt much since leaving France', according to his biographer.²¹ Before launching his bid for Jerusalem in September, he looked after his troops' welfare by ensuring adequate water supplies and medical facilities. Even so, for the likes of Sapper H.P. Bonser the campaign involved a 'nightmare of interminable marching, thirst and tiredness'.²² Conditions were even worse in Turkey's Palestinian army, which was also inferior in numbers and equipment. These advantages enabled Allenby's force to push its way north from Gaza and to capture Jerusalem in December.

When Christmas Day services were held in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Bonser and his pals, who were busy laying cables in the desert, had a festive dinner consisting of 'two biscuits, a tin of bully beef to four and a tin of jam to seventeen men'. On Boxing Day the Turks (now with German reinforcements) made a bid to recapture Jerusalem; they were repulsed but they had shown that Turkey was still an enemy to be taken seriously.

Fighting in the Clouds: The Italian Front

KEY ISSUE How useful was Italy's contribution to the Allied war effort?

a) The Isonzo 1915-16

Italy's decision to declare war on Austria in May 1915 was inspired partly by confidence in the Allied cause at the beginning of the Gallipoli campaign. At this point Austria was heavily committed in

Serbia and Galicia and could not afford to send more than a few divisions to defend its south-western borders. But, like the Turks on the cliffs of Gallipoli, the Austrians occupied an advantageous position – the crests of the highest mountains of Europe, the Dolomites and the Alps. Against this natural fortress were pitted Italian conscripts, who were largely peasants from the south or city lads quite unused to mountain warfare. Their Commander-in-Chief, General Luigi Cadorna, was sure, nevertheless, that he could force his way through Austria by driving his soldiers into constant attacks.

He chose as his first battleground Italy's north-east frontier, where the Austrians occupied the high plateau of Carso above the Isonzo river valley. Italian objectives included the Adriatic port of Trieste and its hinterland. On the Isonzo front Italian troops went on the offensive four times between May and November 1915, losing progressively more men each time and gaining no territory. In March 1916 attacks were resumed and by dint of five more battles during that year Italy gained the town of Gorizia and a foothold on the Carso. In this 'howling wilderness of stones sharp as knives'²³ both sides suffered high casualties caused by splintering rock. When Sergeant Benito Mussolini was wounded here 44 fragments were removed from his body; after his recovery he devoted himself to his newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*, which was later to become a Fascist organ, repeatedly urging Italian soldiers to 'face the enemy'.²⁴ Another junior officer, Emilio Lussu, summed up the stalemate on the Isonzo in May 1916: 'We have done nothing but capture trenches, trenches and trenches – but the situation remained the same.'²⁵ A jingle sung by the troops suggested that if Cadorna wanted to see Trieste he should buy a picture postcard.

b) The Dolomites 1915-16

Another Italian objective was the Austrian Tyrol, even though most of its inhabitants spoke (and still speak) either German or a local language called Ladin. The high frontier in the Dolomite Mountains was very lightly defended in 1915 and the Italians were able to cross it in May; in fact the Austrians regarded it as a military miracle that they did not advance further. The ski resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo was taken by Italian soldiers who were 'disappointed with the coolness with which they were welcomed' by local people. For them, as for so many other civilians in disputed border areas, 'World War One was a disaster'.²⁶

Austrian resistance stiffened after an order from General Conrad that troops 'should construct positions, place obstacles in front of them, and remain there'.²⁷ In July they repulsed 15 Italian attacks and here, too, stalemate ensued as the adversaries fought for possession of the high peaks. 'Clouds hang over us; clouds breathe our breath', wrote Captain Paolo Monelli of the skilled Italian *Alpini* troops, who

attack) in the Dolomites. After a bombardment which Lussu likened to 'an earthquake shaking the mountain', Austrian troops captured many peaks and passes. The Italians, who had been ordered to 'cling to the ground with tooth and nail', managed to limit the enemy advance to twelve miles. Later in the year they regained a third of this territory.

c) Austrian Breakthrough: Caporetto 1917

The Italian soldiers who had taken part in these battles were not well rewarded for their efforts. Pay was so low, rations so meagre and leave so infrequent that the men in Lussu's brigade concluded that 'those bandits prefer to have us starving hungry, thirsty and depressed. ... That way, it's all the same to us whether we live or die.'²⁹ There were no troop entertainments and soldiers were forbidden to enter cinemas and bars even when they were on leave. The only generous provision was of *grappa*, issued before battles and referred to as the *benzina* (motor-fuel) which kept soldiers going. They were also driven by 'a regime of unremitting harshness', enforced by officers who imitated Cadorna in their methods.³⁰ First-hand accounts tell of frequent summary executions at the front line. Sometimes an order came from 'those men down there, nicely shaved, with clean sheets'³¹ that a decimation should be carried out: one in ten men were to be shot in regiments suspected of being mutinous. Firing parties often refused to carry out these orders. Lussu tells of an incident when shots were fired over the heads of the condemned men and then aimed at the major who had given the order. Another punishment took the form of soldiers being tied to trees in No-Man's Land where they would be exposed to crossfire.

It is not surprising that by October 1917, after further fruitless attacks on both fronts in the spring and summer, the Italian army was at a low ebb. It was then that the Austrians (now reinforced with German troops) launched a 'hurricane offensive' at Caporetto on the Isonzo. Assaulted by poison gas (against which they had no adequate protection), high explosive and formidable regiments like Rommel's *Alpenkorps*, Italian soldiers streamed down from the mountains. In 11 days they were pushed back 80 miles, as far as the River Piave, within striking distance of Venice. In the Dolomites too incursions were made and Cortina d'Ampezzo now welcomed the Austrians back. With only 10,000 killed, about 275,000 Italians had surrendered to the enemy and thousands more had deserted. To try to stop this rout Cadorna ordered the summary execution of all 'stragglers', an episode vividly evoked in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. His hero (loosely based on Hemingway himself, who served as an ambulance driver with the Italian army) has become separated from his regiment and escapes from the *carrabinieri* (police) by jumping into the fast-flowing River Tagliamento.



Contrast the battle conditions of Italian and Austrian troops in the Dolomites with those on the Western Front.

often felt 'cut off from the world'. They had only one means of communication and supply - mules who 'go on unheeding amid shell-fire and blizzard and find the path in night and fog'. Soldiers made 'warm dens dug out of the rock, caves of darkness and stench' to protect themselves both from enemy shell-fire and from temperatures which fell to minus 30 degrees Centigrade at night.³² Unknown to high command, men in opposing trenches, who had often been acquainted with each other before the war, sometimes played cards or exchanged coffee for *grappa* (brandy). In the Ampezzo region Italian soldiers took messages to the families of their counterparts in the Austrian army who could not go home on leave to villages under Italian occupation.

There was no such animosity at the top, however. Conrad hated Italians and in May 1916 launched a massive *Strafexpedition* (punishment

Cadorna blamed the disaster of Caporetto on a pervasive social indiscipline and defeatism which caused 'a kind of military strike' in the army. Historians attribute it rather to Cadorna's own mistakes; he had created conditions which facilitated enemy success in the Isonzo valley and he made inadequate preparations; once he suspected an attack was coming. Clearly discipline often did break down at this point but there is no evidence of a soldiers' strike. No orders were given and 'troops simply retreated as fast as they could'.³²

Anyway, Orlando's new government dismissed Cadorna in early November and his successor, Armando Diaz, sought to raise army morale by improving soldiers' conditions and providing better weapons. A further result of Caporetto was that the Allies met at Rapallo and set up a War Council to co-ordinate Italian strategy. What this meant in practice was that British and French troops were sent to help on the Italian front - though it is not entirely true that they took over 'the real defence' of the country as Keegan suggests.³³ Even before the reinforcements arrived, the Italian army had rallied. Fighting during November on the slopes of Monte Grappa at the base of the Dolomites, the *Alpini* stubbornly resisted any further incursion on the 'sacred soil' of Italy. Paolo Monelli's battalion, however, was forced to surrender: 'Since we have had nothing to eat or drink for forty hours, and we have no more cartridges, and we are so few, fate closes the act.' He was imprisoned in the Austrian castle of Salzburg, where Christmas brought him 'a host of sad memories'.³⁴

Conrad ordered another Austrian attack on 23 December, telling his troops that they would celebrate Christmas in Venice. They took Col de Rosso but an Italian counter-attack recaptured the 4000-foot peak on Christmas Eve. Italians gave thanks for the deliverance of Venice as they took Christmas communion in St Mark's Cathedral; a few feet from its doors a stone marking the spot where an Austrian shell landed in 1917 is a reminder of how close Italy came to defeat in that year.

Conclusion

KEY ISSUE How strong was the position of the Central Powers at the end of 1917?

As 1917 came to an end, the Allies had little other than the capture of Jerusalem to celebrate, for the Central Powers seemed to be in the ascendant over most of Europe. German troops still occupied most of Belgium and north-eastern France; much of Russia (including Russian Poland) was in German or Austrian hands; Serbia was held by Austrian and Bulgarian forces; Romania's resources lay at the disposal of Germany; and Austrian soldiers had penetrated far into Italy.

But the outcome of the struggle was not entirely determined by armies fighting for the occupation of territory. Since the beginning of the war the British navy had successfully blockaded the ports of the Central Powers. By this time the inhabitants of Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Constantinople and Sofia, as well as other towns and cities, were suffering the misery of acute food and fuel shortages; thousands had already died of hunger. Strikes, food riots and Communist unrest were festering. Chapter 5 will examine the role of civilian morale in determining the outcome of this 'total war'.

Military morale could also prove an important factor. Although the Austrian and Turkish armies were still in the field both were riven by nationalist tensions and weakened by inadequate supplies. This chapter has demonstrated their dependence on German help at Gallipoli, in Galicia, on the Isonzo and in Palestine; there was no certainty that Germany could continue to sustain its allies to this extent without risking the exhaustion and demoralisation of its own army.

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