

ITALY WINS HER VERDUN ON PIAVE

Route of Austrian Horde an Event in Military History

Boche Held in Check From Alps to the Sea

Issue on Italian Front Is Disposed of Favorably to Allied Cause With Campaign of 1918 but One Half Over.

BY FRANK H. SIMONDS

A WEEK ago I commented here upon the opening of the great Austrian offensive from the Adige to the Adriatic, an operation which disclosed itself obviously as the main Austrian effort of the campaign of 1918 and a final effort on the part of the Hapsburg monarchy to dispose of the single enemy left along its frontiers and thus attain peace. By Monday, June 24, the fifty-ninth anniversary of Solferino, the battle of the Piave had ended in a tremendous Italian success. Italy had won her Verdun, and "They shall not pass" had proved as inspiring a watchword for brave men in Venetia as it had in Lorraine.

In the 10 days of the Piave contest, from its opening on Saturday, June 15, to this second Monday, this great battle passed through three distinct stages. There was first the onset of the Austrians, which resulted in no material gains between the Piave and the Adige. In a considerable success on the Montello heights below the bend of the Piave, which threatened the line of the river, and in a substantial advance in the marshy ground near the delta, which brought the Austrians within a dozen miles of Venice.

Italians Show New Spirit

In the second period, when the Austrians should have been able to exploit their gains and push their offensive home the world had its first evidence of the new spirit of Italian armies. For in this period there was a sudden check to the Austrian advance at all points and the beginning of a series of counter attacks all along the front, which, with little delay, first broke the force of the Austrian thrust and finally halted it, and in places turned it back from the high water mark.

Finally, in the third period the weight of the Italian counter attacks, first in the north in the mountains, then at the mouth of the Piave and finally at the crucial point of Montello heights, began to assume the character of a counter-offensive. In a word, the Austrians lost the initiative and, while the Piave river rose in flood behind them and swept away bridges depriving them of means of receiving munitions and reinforcements, the Italian attacks prevailed and the broken enemy was thrust back across the river in a rout, his offensive destroyed and the safety of his own lines immediately threatened. What happened to the French on a small scale about Solferino in the winter of 1914-1915 now occurred on an enormous scale east of Treviso.

Venice and Verona Saved

As I write these lines on Tuesday, June 25, the measure of the Italian victory is still to be taken. What is clear at the moment is that a supreme Austrian bid for victory has ended in a general rout. The Austrians have been driven back to a disaster and leaves no reasonable doubt as to the final crushing of Austrian hopes of disposing of Italy for the present war. In a word, it is not yet clear whether Udine is to be redeemed and Trieste conquered, but it seems plain beyond peradventure that Venice and Verona have been saved.

Now, just as the Austrian offensive had two different phases, the military and the political, the Austrian defeat must have dual consequences also. Its effect must be felt on the western front almost as much as in Venetia, and its profound reactions in Berlin as well as in Vienna. Not only has Italy given her allies splendid assistance at a critical moment, a new and solid cause for confidence, but she has struck at the very heart of the enemy at a moment when every reserve, however small, was bound to count enormously.

In German calculations the mission of Austria was to dispose of Italy as Grouchy was expected by Napoleon to deal with Blucher in the Waterloo campaign. Austria's failure seems as great as that of Napoleon's general, and at the critical moment on the Western front, when Germany is preparing to make her final and heaviest thrust, her attention and her resources are drawn to a new liability in another quarter. Not only is there no longer the smallest chance of the transfer of Austrian troops to the Western front, but we are already informed that German divisions have been drawn down to the Trentino and the Venetian plain.

Diaz Performs Big Service

All this carries us back nearly four years to the days when the Kaiser was compelled to pause in his rush for Calais because Russian victories in Galicia threatened to bring the Hapsburg military edifice down in a heap if Austrian armies, already verging on rout, were not promptly reinforced. Again, in the Verdun time, Austrian collapse in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia made a fatal demand upon German resources at a moment when the battle of the Somme was beginning and the Meuse fortress still untaken. Diaz, by his victory, has repeated the service of Blucher in the last Russian triumph which in June two



WHERE ITALY BEAT BACK AUSTRIA

strongest incentive of the advancing Austrians, but what must be the feelings of the survivors, for whom Italian booty is no longer even a remote hope? For whom hunger is now assured without promise of the relief a promised victory held out?

The world has been too frequently in past months promised an Austrian collapse to be easily convinced now that the Italian victory will be followed by a prompt collapse of the dual monarchy. We shall look rather to the benefits which cannot be doubted, the gain in morale in Western Europe, the quick rise in allied hopes and expectations, the restoration to Italy of a confidence cruelly shaken at the Isone by the Caporetto disaster, rather than to the remote possibilities of profit. One of the great dangers of the year has been removed, one of the causes of apprehension has been eliminated; we do not have to hold the west front while the Venetian line still worries us. The Boche is stopped from the Alps to the sea—this is the immediate conclusion to be drawn and its importance is immense. Half way through the campaign of 1918 the issue on one front is disposed of, while the prospects on the main front are hourly improving.

On the eve of battle the commanders of the Austrian armies addressed their troops in words recalling the famous appeals of Napoleon to equally famished soldiers nearly a century and a quarter ago. They promised their divisions that they were to find food and plunder in the cities and fields which fed the Napoleonic veterans of the earlier period. The very hope of finding food was the

Austrians Are Promised Food

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Operation Is on Big Scale

On the military side of the story of the battle of the Piave, one of the half a dozen great struggles of the war, is simply

isolated plateau, from which, were it in enemy hands, Austrian guns could rake the rear, both of the Italian troops on Monte Grappa between the Piave and the Brenta and behind the Piave from Nervosa southward.

Montello Is Chief Effort

Montello heights, to give this plateau its familiar name, is the key alike to the crossings of the Piave for many miles southward, to the highways supplying the front of the Piave and to a vital portion of the front on the hills. The push at Montello was the main Austrian effort and not until the Austrians had been driven from this high ground toward the end of the battle was the Italian victory assured. Most but not quite all of Montello was at once taken in Austrian hands, a portion was held until the closing hours of the offensive, and at this point the Austrians came triumphing, an ace of scoring a decisive triumph.

Southward of Montello the Austrians effected a number of crossings of the river, but their main thrust was almost at the edge of the marshes, where the river divides into several channels. Here they came nearest to Venice and at one moment were less than 12 miles from the city of the Doges, but fortunately the marshy nature of the ground prevented any use of heavy artillery and Venice escaped the fate which Rheims and Amiens are enduring.

Of the three attacks that in the north was the least severe and the soonest disposed of. The famous fighting ground at Asiago was held. The Monte Grappa positions, which are to be a national park when the war is over, preserve them in Italian memory, positions which command both the Piave and Brenta valleys, were retained, with only light losses. Austrian hands here experienced the same check which two years ago blocked an offensive designed to produce a supreme Italian disaster by cutting off the retreat of armies then fighting far eastward at the Isone.

By contrast, the attack of Montello was the most successful and, despite hopeful bulletins, there were certainly several days during which it was touch and go whether Montello would fall into Austrian hands and the line of the Piave have to be abandoned. As the mountain line held firmly, this would not have meant a disaster, but it would have compelled a retirement upon and beyond Treviso and would eventually have exposed Venice to bombardment, if not to capture. As for Austrian progress southward, it was not considerable, and the fighting in this region, while intense, was relatively less important.

Fortunately, the Italians possessed the interior lines. They could concentrate their reserves and artillery on any danger point with the briefest delay, and by the third day the counter attacks at Montello were proceeding and bit by bit the high ground was won back. Before the end of the first week of battle the Austrian gain had been turned into nothing more serious than a huge bridgehead, and thereafter the flood in the Piave played into Italian hands and deprived the Austrians, who had crossed on various military bridges, of all communications with their rear.

It would be unfair to ascribe the Italian victory to the floods. The Austrian advance had been checked and thrown back before the water rose, but it was the flood which settled the question of whether the Austrians would be able to retain something of their gains west of the river. By Saturday, June 22, the Italian prime minister was able to announce that the battle was already becoming an undisputed triumph; by Sunday Austrian bulletins were talking about the flood and manifestly preparing the Austrian public for the announcement of a defeat. By Monday Washington bulletins were supplementing Rome accounts of victory with the announcement of 4,000 prisoners and innumerable captured guns. The evacuation of all Austrian positions west of the river was officially reported and the word rout was being used in battle accounts.

Credit Belongs to Italy

Such, in brief, is the story of the battle of the Piave. Its main circumstance, from the point of view of Austrian strategy, was the seizure of Montello and the menacing both of the line of the river and of the Grappa positions by the threat to the rear of both lines from the Montello heights. The other attacks seem to have been subsidiary, and they certainly lost importance when Montello was evacuated.

No reports suggest that the Austrians did not put up a stiff fight or that the Italians had an immediate and easy triumph. The first days of fighting were exceedingly severe and the Austrians seem to have shown unusual contempt for losses and unexpected tenacity. They were beaten only because Italian morale was even higher, Italian high command fully prepared and Italian numbers

Political Results To Be Far Reaching

Substantial Defeat Cannot Go Far to Silence the Unrest Among Austrian Masses Who Suffer Keenly From Hunger.

of the fighting indicates high losses and losses which in the case of the assailant must have been far greater than for the Italians. Moreover, the Austrian retreat must have cost the Hapsburg army a vast store of material in addition to guns, which had been moved across the river while the advance was unchecked and before the rains in the mountains caused the river to leave its banks.

There remains the great question of what explains the transformation of the Italian army in a period much shorter than a year. Many elements must be involved in the answer. First of all, it is well to remember that only one Italian army was responsible for the Caporetto disaster and that was an army made up of second line troops, assigned to a quiet sector where no serious operation was expected.

At the moment of Caporetto the mass Isone and on the Bainsizza plateau was making a magnificent fight. The valor, the endurance and the tenacity of the Italian troops fighting on the lower Isone last year remain a splendid page in Italian military history.

Italy Asserts Her Unity

On the other hand, inferior troops on a quiet sector were unquestionably undermined by enemy propaganda and did desert a post of danger under an attack which was not in the least comparable with the present attack, although in view of the German successes in France this year there must be a tendency to revise views as to the efficacy of the German attack at Caporetto.

In any event, the rally of the main Italian forces was prompt, a great disaster was avoided and Italy stood at the Piave last year, even before she was effectively aided by allied arms. The consequences of the defeat were immediately shown in a revival of Italian determination.

We may say that the sight of half of Venetia occupied by the enemy, the knowledge of what Italian women and children were suffering, of what Italian towns were enduring in the invaded districts, served to rouse the Italians as dreams of conquest along the Dalmatian coast or on the road to Vienna did not and could not. However Italy may have been divided over the question of an offensive war for grander objectives, she was united in a determination to preserve her unity, won at so great sacrifices in the previous century, and the presence of the Austrian invader in Venetia served to consolidate the nation and reanimate the soldier.

It is interesting to perceive the contrast between the Italian and the Rus-

sian events. Defeats in Russia led to the destruction of a nation little permeated with any national sentiment and still a collection of races rather than a great people bound by common ideals and a common history. In the case of Italy, on the contrary, although Italian unity had been achieved only a few decades ago, the essential unity of the nation manifested itself in adversity, exactly as French unity and national spirit had flamed up after the early defeats which preceded the Battle of the Marne in 1914.

An Event in Military History

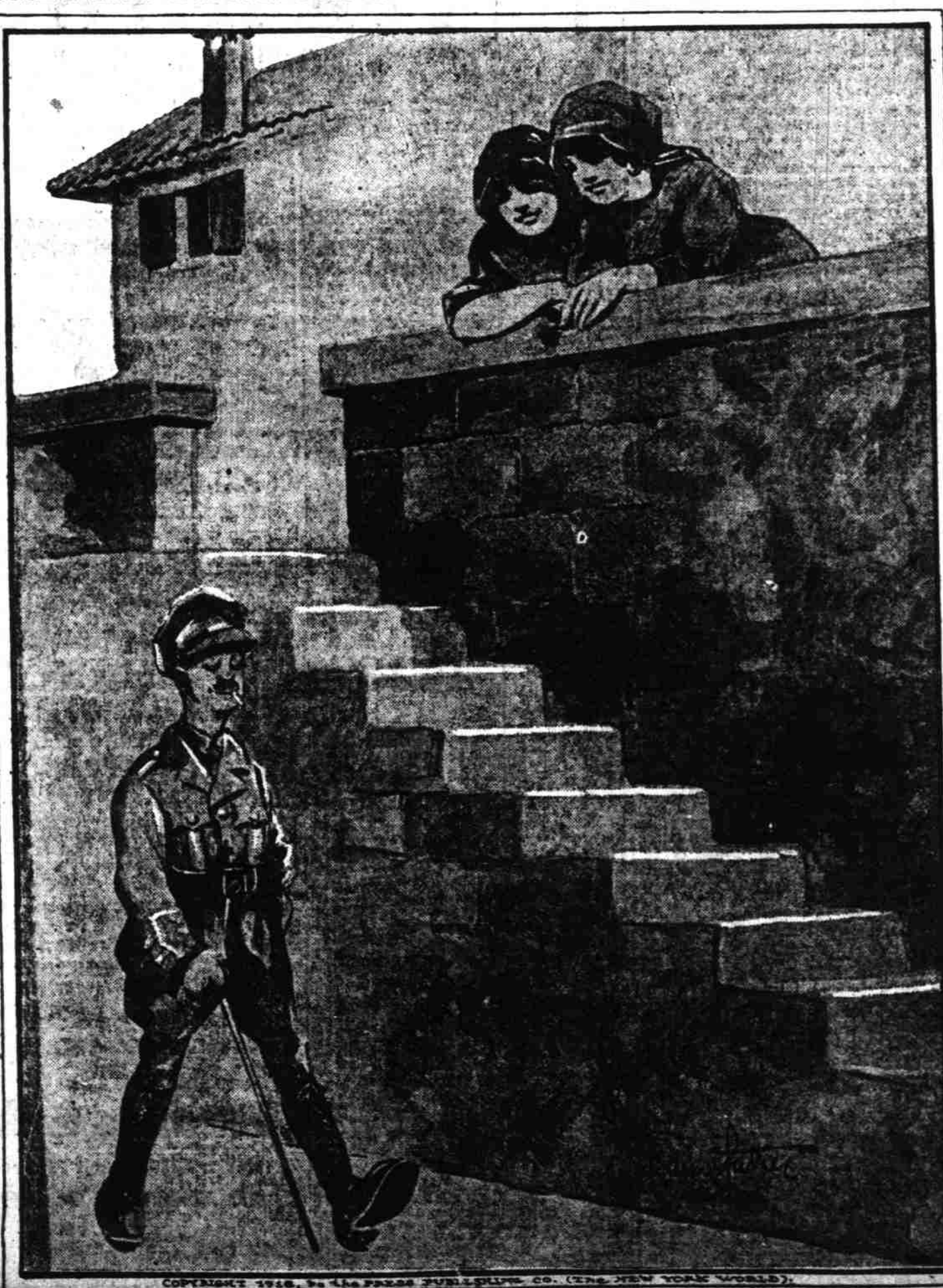
The Battle of the Piave is a great event in the military history of the world war. It is an enormous contribution to the common cause at a critical hour and in a critical campaign. Its effect politically must be beyond its military effect. Its moral effect can hardly be exaggerated. But it is worth while recalling that it is likely to be an enduring incident in the history of the Italian people—a history in which military defeats have been frequent but patriotic devotion unflinching. Now, after a terrible defeat and long suffering, Italy has emerged victorious in a contest with a far greater nation, possessing larger human resources in numbers and aided by German material and German strategy.

Italy has won her Verdun on the Piave. It is hardly less important to the allied cause than that French victory along the Meuse which held the line until Britain could arrive.

On the military side, it is too soon to forecast the consequences of the victory. The Austrians may still stand at the Piave; they may retire to the Tagliamento, where we know they have made great preparations and created a strong defensive line; or they may be forced back ultimately to the Isone, behind which they stood prior to the Caporetto victory of last year. In any event, unless their army loses its cohesion and submits to a rout comparable to that of Jena, the chances of a considerable Italian advance are slight and the natural obstacles in the way of an Italian advance toward Vienna are so great that one could only forecast such progress by accepting the present signs as indicative of a complete relapse of Austrian military power—and the present signs do not warrant any such expectations. What is clear, it would seem, is that the power of Austria for offensive operations this year without German aid is broken, and that any German aid sent to the Italian front must weaken greatly and perhaps decisively the weight of the German blow in France.

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