



THE BRITISH ARMY IN ITALY 1917-1918

JOHN WILKS & EILEEN WILKS

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by
John and Eileen Wilks



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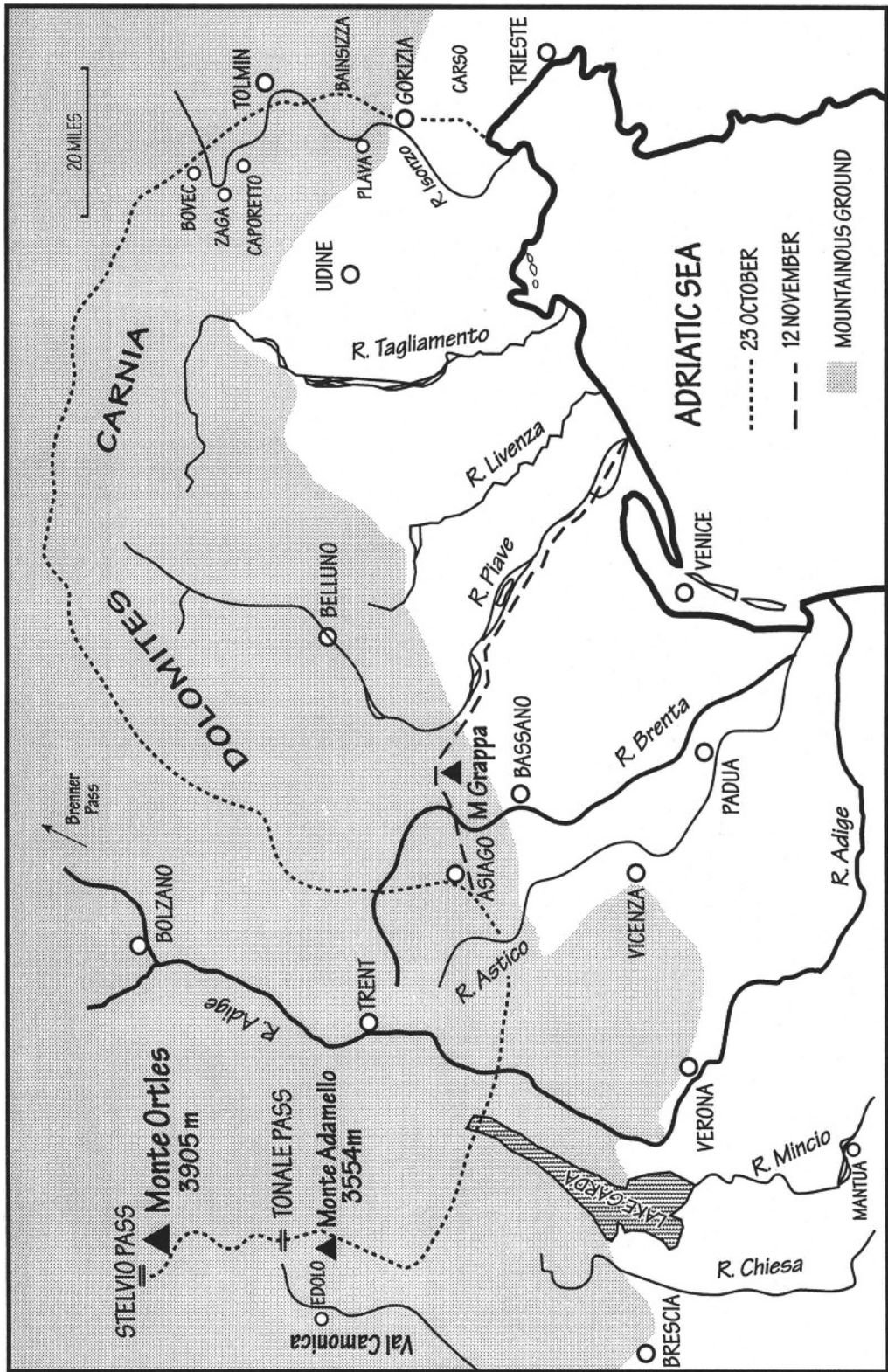
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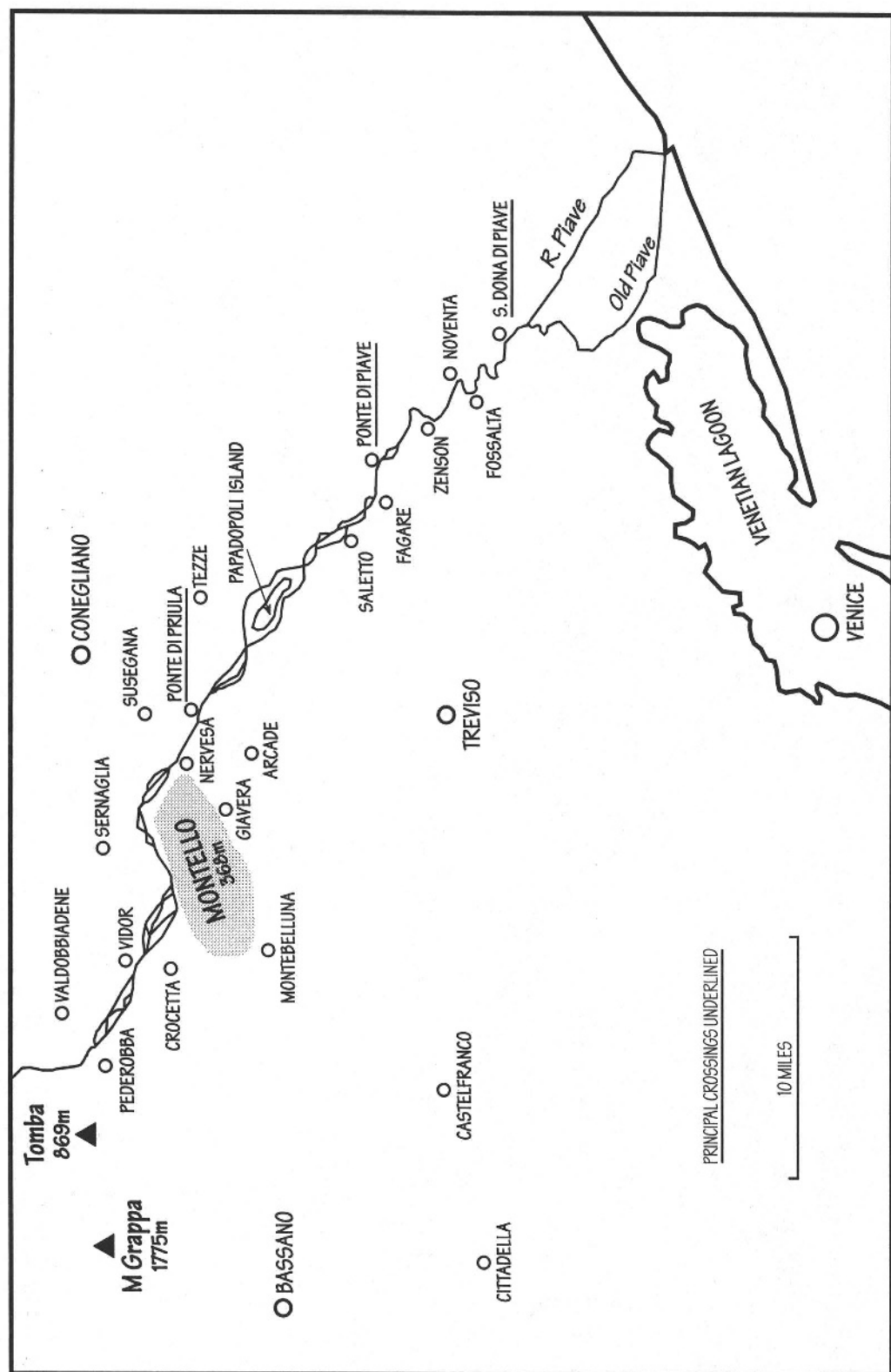
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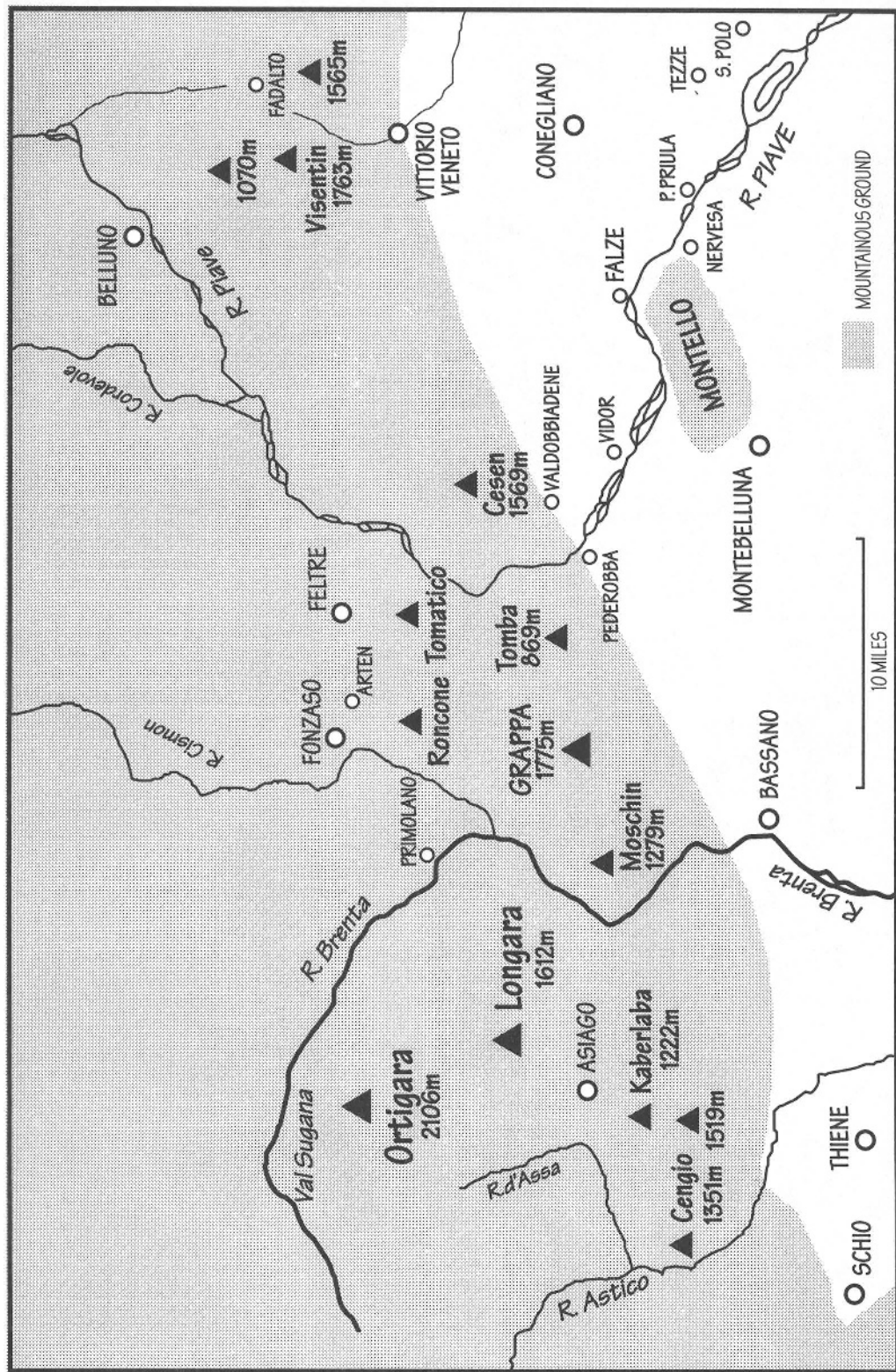
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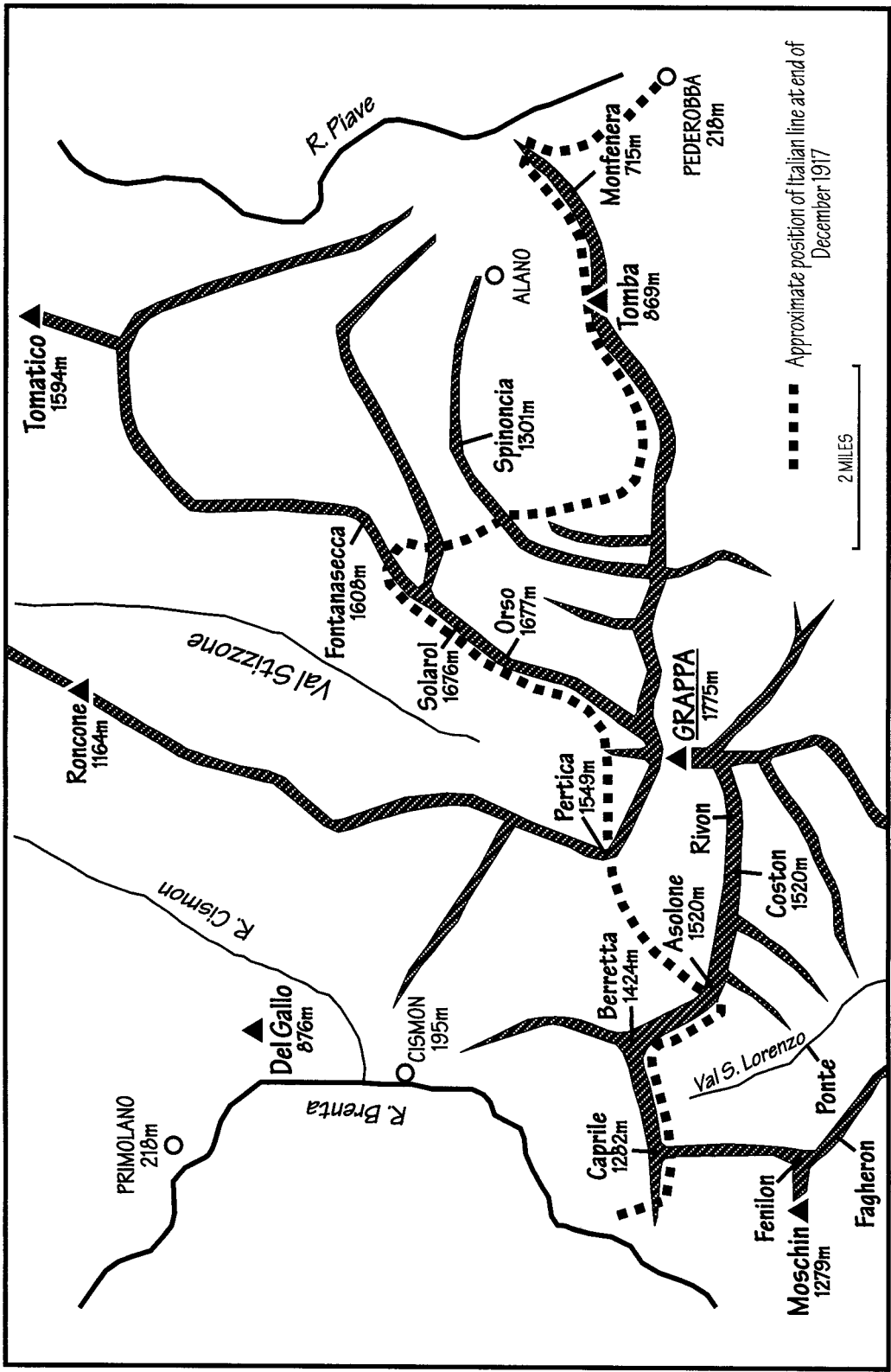
MAP 1. The Italian front line before and after the battle of Caporetto.



MAP 2. The River Piave after leaving the mountains.



MAP 3. The Asiago Plateau, Monte Grappa and the Piave.



MAP 4. The Italian front line on the Monte Grappa massif at the end of December 1917. (After IOH (V,1), Carta 8)

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Introduction

During 1917 the Allied Armies fighting Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had endured difficult times. The Nivelle offensive in April had failed, leaving a legacy of mutinies which much reduced the effectiveness of the French armies for the rest of the year. After great exertions and great losses, the Russian war effort had collapsed with the Revolution. The British Army had been battling against the German trench lines on the Western Front, making little progress, and in the latter part of the year was bogged down around Passchendaele in the mud of Flanders.

Italy had been fighting the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or Austria for short, principally by striking across the only approximately flat part of their common frontier, the Carso, a limestone plateau beyond the Isonzo River at the eastern end of the frontier (Map 1). The town of Gorizia had been captured in 1916, but subsequent progress towards the target of Trieste had been slow, with costly attacks on entrenched positions. However, in the 11th Battle of the Isonzo in August and September 1917 the Italians had pushed the Austrians back for a few, but significant, kilometres on the high ground of the Bainsizza Plateau. Then, at the end of October, a combined German and Austrian force attacked Italian positions in the deep and narrow valleys around the upper Isonzo River and inflicted on the Italian Army one of the most striking and unexpected defeats of the war, known as the Battle of Caporetto.

The attack broke through the Italian line, thus forcing the whole of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Italian Armies to give up all the areas captured during the war and to retreat first to the line of the Tagliamento River and then to the Piave River, a retreat of up to 70 miles, bringing the Austrians to within only 20 miles of Venice. This was a great disaster, so much so that the name of a small village now in Slovenia has passed into the Italian language. When Prime Minister Amado spoke to the nation after the sudden devaluation of the lira in September 1992 he said on television, "This is a very serious matter," and continued, "but not a Caporetto". Today in Britain, a thousand miles away, if the part played by Italy in the First World War is known at all, it is most probably as a recollection of the débâcle of Caporetto.

The battle was an upset involving a loss of territory comparable to that lost by the Allies in France and Belgium in 1914, and a loss of men and material on an enormous scale. The whole of the Italian 2nd Army disappeared as a fighting unit. In all, 10,000 Italians died, 30,000 were wounded, 300,000 taken prisoner and another 350,000 troops broken down into dispersed and disordered units. Yet only eight months later a full scale Austrian offensive to knock Italy out of the war was stopped dead in its tracks in a matter of days. Then, after five more months, the Austrian Army finally collapsed during the Allied offensive known as the Battle of Vittorio Veneto.

The part played by the British Army in Italy during the Second World War is well known, but not the role of the French and British troops sent to Italy during the last year of the First World War. Many people are unaware that French and British divisions fought in Italy, and that Italian divisions fought in France. Moreover, comments on Caporetto in works of general reference are sometimes as inaccurate as any to be found regarding the First World War. All this is a matter for regret because the Italian, French and British divisions in Italy made significant contributions to the winning of the First World War I, and the French and British expeditions to Italy were among the most successful Allied expeditions of the War.

The publication of the later volumes of the Italian Official History (IOH) was much delayed by the Second World War. The volume for the last three months of 1917 and the accompanying volume of documents, over 1200 pages in all, appeared in 1967 and the volumes for 1918 only in 1980 and 1988. In consequence the Italian Official History has a rather remarkable background. Most of the official accounts of the First World War were prepared in the inter-war years when official historians were faced with the task of recording events which had caused much pain and grief without adding to that grief by denigrating, or even accurately describing, the actions of famous wartime leaders. However, by the time the final volumes of the Italian history were produced all the principal actors had left the stage and the authors were able to set out a full and balanced account of a very complex subject.

There has been no British account of either Caporetto or of the Allied expeditions subsequent to the publication of the Italian Official History in 1967. Indeed, as far as the part played by the British forces are concerned, the only complete account is that given in the masterly volume of the *Official British History of the War, Military Operations, Italy, 1915–1918*, by Edmonds and Davies, published in 1949. There are, however, several first hand personal accounts of aspects of the campaign, and also various accounts in documents in the Public Record Office, some of which have been opened only

comparatively recently. Unfortunately many of these accounts are not too readily available. Hence it appears worthwhile to make use of all the material now available to produce a new account for British readers.

Italy at War 1915–1917

1. The Last Battles of the Risorgimento

The war between Italy and Austria was part of the First World War but was fought for reasons which were specific to Italy and Austria. Geographically Italy has always been a well defined area – the peninsula south of the Alps – but even in the days of the Roman Empire the whole area was never consolidated into a single administrative unit. The decline of Rome was followed by a long succession of invaders whose aims and philosophy have seldom been better expressed than in the young Napoleon's address to the French Army of Italy in 1796. "Soldiers, you are famished and nearly naked. The government owes you much, but can do nothing for you. Your patience, your courage, do you honour, but give you no glory, no advantage. I will lead you into the most fertile plains in the world. There you will find great towns, rich provinces. There you will find honour, glory and riches."¹

Even in the great days of the rich and powerful city states of the Renaissance, foreign influence was never far away. Spain, France and Austria jostled each other for power and possessions in Italy. However, to understand the background to the war of 1915 it is sufficient to go back no further than the Peace of Utrecht signed in 1713 at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, the long struggle by England, Holland, Germany and Austria against France and Spain under Louis XIV. So far as Italy was concerned, the Peace replaced a long period of Spanish domination by a long period of Austrian domination.

Under the Peace of Utrecht Austria received Milan, Mantua and Naples, and shortly afterwards Sicily. In 1734 Don Carlos, the son of Philip V of Spain, tried to recover these losses, and by 1738 had retaken Naples and Sicily and established himself as the King of the Two Sicilies until he returned to Spain on the death of Philip V. His young son Ferdinand then became King in Sicily and in 1768 married a daughter of Maria Theresa of Austria, thus reintroducing Austrian influence. Meanwhile Tuscany had also come under Austrian influence after the death of the last Medici Grand Duke in 1737 when the duchy passed to the husband of the young Maria Theresa. Hence the only parts of Italy

free of Austria in the latter part of the 18th century were the weak Papal States, the independent but much weakened republic of Venice, and Piedmont under the Counts of Savoy, who had managed to maintain an independent role among more powerful neighbours.

All the above arrangements came to an abrupt end when the French revolutionary army irrupted into Italy. By 1798 the whole of Italy and Switzerland had been reorganized as five republics, except that Savoy had been annexed to France, and Venice, with Venetia and the Dalmatian Coast, transferred to Austria. Ten years later the French Republic had become the Empire of Napoleon, and Piedmont, Tuscany, Rome and the Papal States had been absorbed directly into France. The rest of Italy, apart from Venice and its provinces, was divided into three kingdoms: Italy, Naples and Sardinia. Napoleon himself became King of Italy, which included Lombardy and the Romagna, and gave the crown of Naples first to his brother and then to his brother-in-law. Sicily remained free of French rule under Ferdinand, who had fled there from Naples, protected by Nelson and the British Navy standing off the Straits of Messina.

All was changed again by the fall of Napoleon. The aim of the Congress of Vienna was, roughly speaking, to restore territories to their original owners, or, rather more accurately, to their rulers in 1789. However, Austria was one of the victorious powers and her affairs were guided by one of Europe's most wily statesmen, Prince Metternich. Therefore, besides removing the French invader from Italy, the Congress also endorsed the transfer of Venice and her provinces, Venetia and Venezia Julia, to Austria, even though Venice had formerly been an independent republic.

The victorious powers at the Congress of Vienna were principally concerned with restoring the *status quo* and ensuring future stability. To this end they rearranged frontiers and transferred provinces from one state to another. At no stage in the lengthy discussions did it occur to the debating governments to take serious notice of the views of the peoples inhabiting these lands. Thus the obviously Italian peoples of Lombardy and Venice were brusquely transferred to Austria.

After 1815 the ruling classes sought to return to the world which had passed away in 1789. The old forms of government were restored, apparently with some success, but great changes had come about in the political thinking of Europe. The philosophy and ideals of the early Revolution were to result in a growing demand by the peoples of Europe for a much greater say in the ordering of their affairs, and for an end of rule by foreign powers. Peoples with similar backgrounds and language began to associate to obtain more representative government, and, if need be, to expel foreign governments. These themes had a widespread attraction. The eventual excesses of nationalism were yet to come, and the new movements were wellnigh irresistible.

From 1815 onwards Italy was fertile ground for the new developments. Most of the country was under foreign rule and the years of French occupation had left their mark. The Italians had been shown vistas of better administration with wider social and economic contacts than were to be found in the narrow and restricted courts which came with the restoration of 1815. From then on there was to be continuous political agitation, by propaganda and secret societies, until Italy obtained unity and independence in 1870. The history of this movement, the Risorgimento, is largely the story of a struggle against Austria.

The main concern of Austria throughout the 19th century was to prevent the disintegration of the Hapsburg Empire, a widespread and heterogeneous collection of peoples and races gathered together under Austrian rule. In Italy, as elsewhere, the Austrians relied on a repressive administration and a strong army. Their grip on Italy was strengthened by building up their garrisons particularly in the well sited fortresses of Peschiera and Mantua on the Mincio River, and Verona and Legnano on the Adige River, forming the famous so-called Quadrilateral.

The most independent and powerful Italian state was the Kingdom of Sardinia, ruled by the Dukes of Savoy and based principally in Piedmont, and it was this state which eventually formed the nucleus of a united Italy. However, the Italian states were never able to create sufficient military force to act decisively against Austria, and unification was only possible because of military help provided by France and Germany. In fact the pace of unification was set by the extent to which the other interests of France and Germany permitted their involvement.

Napoleon III had been banished from France in his youth, and while living in Italy had taken an enthusiastic part in the attempted revolution of 1831. As Emperor he seems to have had a romantic vision of a free Italy, and was therefore willing to assist Savoy against Austria. In 1859 the victories of French and Piedmont troops at Magenta and Solferino gained Lombardy from Austria, and caused the flight of the rulers of Florence, Parma, Modena and the Romagna. The following year Garibaldi with his famous 'Thousand Volunteers' gained first Sicily and then Naples.

The liberated states gathered together under Savoy and the first Italian parliament was held in Turin in 1861. However, Venice and her provinces still remained under Austria, and Rome and the Papal States under the Pope. In 1866 Prussia joined Italy in a war against Austria. Despite Italian fiascos at Custoza and Lissa, the Prussian victory at Sadowa in Bohemia resulted in the liberation of Venice. The following year Garibaldi led his march on Rome but was turned back by French troops, for Napoleon was now fearful of offending the clerical party in France. However, three years later France was forced by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war to withdraw those troops back to France.

Then, on 20 September 1870, Italian troops under General Raffaele Cadorna occupied Rome, and in the following year Rome became the capital of a united Italy.

After 1870 almost all Italians were united in the State of Italy but there were still areas where a largely Italian population was governed by Austria, principally in the Trentino and in the town of Trieste at the head of the Adriatic. The Trentino coincided with the present province of Trent, situated on either side of the Adige River and the road to the Brenner Pass, and forming part of a large salient projecting into Italy (Map 1). Its population was overwhelmingly Italian in thought and outlook.

As the Brenner is one of the easiest routes through the main chain of the Alps, the salient had originally been settled from both the north and the south, with a quite well defined language frontier a few miles south of Bolzano. Hence, although the Trentino was Italian speaking, the majority of the people of Bolzano province spoke German and regarded themselves as part of the Austrian homeland. In the 14th century all the salient was held by the Counts of Tyrol with their main residence at Tyrol about twenty miles from Bolzano. About 1420 the Counts built a new castle at Innsbruck and this became their main residence. Later, during the reign of the Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian (1493–1519) the whole of the Tyrol was firmly incorporated into the Austrian Empire, so that even after 1870 the entirely Italian province of the Trentino was still part of Austria.

There were also considerable numbers of Italians in the towns which had been colonized by the energy of the Venetian republic, such as Trieste and Fiume on the Adriatic, and Gorizia on the lower Isonzo. The native peoples generally spoke Slovene as most of their descendants still do in the countryside, but the main commercial activity, trade with the East, was conducted by Italians in Italian. Thus the towns became increasingly Italian in their views and culture, so that even after the decline of Venice they remained as Italian enclaves in a hinterland of Slav peoples all under Austrian administration.

After 1870 the Nationalists viewed these Italian enclaves in the Austrian Empire as *Italia Irredenta*, the unfinished business of the Risorgimento. The argument for the Trentino was overwhelming, but for the other areas somewhat debatable. The rallying cry for the Nationalists was the Trentino and Trieste, the latter having the strongest claim after the Trentino. The presence of *Italia Irredenta* after 1870 was a permanent reminder to the new state that the aim of the Risorgimento was not yet completely fulfilled. The war when it came in 1915 was about frontiers and can certainly be viewed as the last stage of the Risorgimento. Yet the reasons for Italy's entry into the war were varied and more complex.

The new Italy was formed by an association of states differing greatly in form and outlook, stretching from the liberal conservative Piedmont to the radical disorganized south. It was to be a long time before these disparate parts would weld together and produce a coherent government with a clear programme of policies. However, in the field of foreign affairs the first objective was quite clear, to ensure the security of the state against interference by more powerful neighbours.

Austria still regretted the loss of Lombardy and Venetia and would have been all too willing to take control again should opportunity present. Moreover, the Trentino salient gave the Austrians an ideal starting point for an attack on the Italian plain, as well as strong defensive positions against any Italian attack. Relations between the two countries would have been greatly improved by the transfer of the Trentino to Italy, thus removing a genuine cause of political instability and providing a military frontier more equal to both sides. However, Austria was determined to resist any further reductions in her empire, and attitudes were allowed to harden.

France had played a large part in the unification of Italy and might have appeared the obvious ally to support the new state. Yet French troops had protected Rome against Garibaldi's march in 1867 and were only recalled to meet the Prussian attack on France in 1870. Moreover, by 1880 a serious dispute had developed between France and Italy, as the French in Algeria wished to expand their interests into Tunisia where the Italians were already the most numerous group of European colonists. Hence in 1882 Bismarck, seeking to protect Germany against France, persuaded Italy to join with Germany and Austria in the Triple Alliance which guaranteed Italy support against attack from either France or Austria, in return for her support if Germany or Austria were to be attacked.

With the signing of the Triple Alliance the Italian government formally renounced any claims to *Italia Irredenta*. In fact the Trentino did enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. Italian was the official language of the schools, the courts, and the administration, though not of the police or the army. Yet there remained sufficient discrimination to stimulate the activity of the mainly middle-class intellectuals. The provision of German speaking schools in the Trentino for the children of Austrian officials was much resented. Attempts to establish Italian speaking universities at Trent and Trieste were blocked by Vienna. In 1891 Austria deprived Trieste of the long established trading privileges of an imperial free port, and the authorities encouraged Austrian and Slav immigration to offset the Italian population.

During the years before the war relations between Italy and Austria slowly deteriorated. Beyond the particular details of the Irredentist claims lay the suspicion that the ageing Empire still looked backward

resentfully to its lost powers. The Commander in Chief of the Austrian Army was the old Emperor Franz Joseph, but the effective commander was the Chief of Staff. For most of the time since 1906 the post had been held by General Conrad von Hotzendorf who believed that war with Italy was inevitable and argued that Austria should strike first in a 'preventive' war against her partner in the Triple Alliance.² Thus, in an atmosphere of suspicion, both sides set about building up their forces and defensive positions, particularly in the Trentino where their impressive array of roads and fortresses remain to this day.

Under the terms of the Triple Alliance Italy agreed to support Austria and Germany if they were attacked. However, if either Austria or Germany themselves took the initiative Italy was committed only to a benevolent neutrality, and this was the position when Austria initiated the fighting in the First World War by attacking Serbia. There was also a clause in the treaty which laid down that any extension of Austrian territory in the Balkans should be accompanied by equivalent territorial compensation for Italy. Austria neither informed nor consulted Italy prior to her declaration of war, and refused to discuss the question of compensation, which Italy held to refer to the Trentino. Thus the bonds tying Italy to the Triple Alliance, both formal and moral, were now minimal, and Italy declared her neutrality on 2 August 1914.

It seems probable that the silent majority in Italy in 1914 had had enough of war after the events of the colonial campaign in Libya from 1911 onwards and wanted peace and quiet, although sympathetic to France and Britain. There were, moreover, many divisions and currents in Italian opinion. Many industrialists had close links with Germany. The Catholic Church still resented the loss of its temporal powers and estates in 1870 and looked for support towards the Catholic Emperor of Austria. Some socialists were against the war because they feared it might strengthen the authority of the Imperial Russian Government. More importantly the veteran politician Giolitti, who had immense personal influence, also opposed intervention. In favour of intervention, besides the Irredentists and friends of France, there were also Nationalists and enthusiasts for war like the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio. However, whatever their views, all agreed that Italy could not enter the war immediately as the army was not yet ready.

During the later months of 1914 Italy had the opportunity to reflect on the German occupation of Belgium and a large part of France, on the German defeat of the Russians at Tannenberg, and the Austrian invasion of Serbia. It was difficult to avoid asking what would be the position of Italy after a German-Austrian victory, and urgent steps were taken to bring the army up to strength. The government tried to negotiate with her partners in the Triple Alliance to obtain the transfer of the Trentino but the attempt failed after drawn out discussions.

Finally, on 26 April 1915 Italy signed the secret Treaty of London which committed her to join Britain, France and Russia in the war against the Central Powers, and promised in return the transfer to Italy of the whole of the Trentino salient as far north as the Brenner, of Trieste and the adjacent region of Istria, and of parts of the Dalmatian coast, as well as rights in Albania and the Dodecanese.

There remained only one difficulty to be overcome. The negotiations on the Italian side had been conducted in secret by Prime Minister Salandra and Foreign Minister Sonnino, consulting only with the King, Victor Emmanuel III. It was now necessary to obtain parliamentary approval for a declaration of war, but it seemed that some 300 out of the 500 deputies were against intervention. On 4 May 1915 Italy withdrew publicly from the Triple Alliance, and the government set to work to obtain the necessary consent of parliament for war.³

The poet-agitator D'Annunzio was brought back from France to make rabble rousing speeches on the beauty of war and the glory of Italy. According to the American Ambassador his first speech at Genoa had the effect of a firebrand struck into a charged magazine.⁴ Similar assistance was provided by the journalist Benito Mussolini, observing at first hand how to subvert a parliamentary majority. The Austrian Ambassador reported demonstrations by "the hired mob" in "all the larger cities". Deputies in Rome were roughly handled and a cavalry guard had to be placed on the home of Giolitti, the leader of the parliamentary opposition.⁵ Giolitti had been somewhat out of touch with events and had only recently been informed of the Treaty of London. He now realized that, after breaking with Austria, the King's position would become impossible if Italy then failed to honour its obligations towards the Allies, and he therefore left Rome. The demonstrations had the desired effect, and parliament declared war on 24 May by 407 votes to 74, after three weeks' uproar and debate which gave Austria time to alert her defences.

2. The War to October, 1917

The nominal Commander in Chief of the Italian Army was the King, but the effective Commander was General Cadorna, the Chief of Staff and head of the Comando Supremo, the Italian High Command. Indeed Cadorna had accepted this appointment on 27 July 1914, on the death of his predecessor General Pollio, only on condition that the King played no executive role. Cadorna was then faced with the task of strengthening and replenishing the army which was in rather a poor state following its campaign in Libya during the previous two years. He was a capable organizer and set about building up an army for any eventuality. (The term Comando Supremo is commonly

used to refer both to the Chief of Staff and to the Italian High Command.)

The course of the war was greatly conditioned by the mountainous nature of the border regions between Italy and Austria. The front line was about 300 miles long and, except for about 20 miles, was either mountainous or very mountainous (Map 1). Moreover, this frontier had been drawn many years previously to give considerable military advantage to Austria, because being near to the edge of the mountains, a short advance by the Austrians would take them into the Italian plain. On the other hand, if the Italians were to advance, they would find themselves going deeper and deeper into increasingly difficult mountain country.

The only obvious place to deploy large bodies of troops was on the relatively flat ground on either side of the last twenty miles or so of the Isonzo River below Gorizia. Therefore the Italian plan in 1915 was to attack across the lower reaches of the Isonzo, thrusting towards Trieste and perhaps eventually to Ljubljana and Vienna. As Italy had entered the war at a time of her own choosing it might seem that her army had the opportunity of striking an overwhelming blow against Austria whose army was heavily engaged with the Russians.

In fact, as described in the previous section, the timing of Italy's entry into the war on 24 May was governed by the exigencies of political considerations rather than by a well prepared military programme. As a result of these circumstances the Austrians were able to obtain at least three weeks warning of Italy's move. In addition the Italian army was not yet completely ready for a major action. Hence the first stage of the war was not an Italian onslaught on the Austrians but rather a re-adjustment of positions on both sides, mainly along the Isonzo and in the Trentino salient.

The pre-war frontier followed the watershed to the west of the Isonzo River for about 100 miles from the mountains to the sea, but did not give the Austrians a good line of defence. Hence, as the Austrians were already heavily engaged on their Eastern Front, their first move was to draw back from the frontier and take up previously prepared positions on either side of the river. The Italians then carried out a series of intermittent attacks during 1915 known as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Battles of the Isonzo.

On the upper Isonzo the Italians made a considerable advance across the river between Tolmin and Bovec (Map 1), where they even gained positions on the summit of Monte Nero (2346m, now called Krm). This was a fine effort by the alpini, the Italian mountain troops, but did not offer much prospect of any subsequent advance in force. Below Tolmin, the river was forced at Plava and a small bridgehead established on the east side of the Isonzo. However, beyond the river the ground rose

steeply to the plateau of the Bainsizza some 600 or so metres above, and the bridge itself was open to enemy artillery fire. Further south, strong Italian forces had come up to the considerable defences of the town of Gorizia on the west side of the river, including the surrounding hills of Sabotino (609m), Podgora (240m) and San Michele (275m).

Along the lower Isonzo the Italians were across the river in force and on the edge of the Carso, a green but infertile limestone plateau which extends from below Gorizia almost to the coast. Its general level is from 100 to 200 metres above the river and its undulations have gentle slopes, save on the western edge where the plateau drops down to the plain. In fact the Carso, though in no way mountainous, formed the type of defensive barrier so eagerly sought by the warring armies on the plains of France, particularly as the hard limestone rock, barely covered by the soil, had permitted the Austrians to construct bunkers and gun positions well protected from attack. The British historian Cyril Falls comments that the Italian infantry "showed splendid courage in hopeless tasks".⁶ By the end of the year the Italians had suffered losses and casualties amounting in all to about 180,000, but had made little significant progress.

The next year, in May 1916, General Conrad, the Austrian Chief of Staff and virtual Commander in Chief, launched a full scale offensive with the aim of breaking out of the mountainous Trentino Salient into the Italian plain, behind the main Italian armies on the Isonzo. He gathered together fourteen divisions with 180 battalions in the south-eastern corner of the Trentino salient together with a superior force of artillery, and on 15 May launched the so-called Strafexpedition (*Straf*: punishment) designed to punish Austria's former ally. Despite strong resistance, the Italians were forced to give ground. At the end of the month, after heavy fighting all along the line, the Italians had been pushed to the very edge of the mountains overlooking the Venetian plain.

The Italian Commander, General Cadorna, believed that this line would hold, but at the same time decided to transfer the reserves of the armies of the Isonzo to create a new 5th Army ready in the plain to deal with any Austrian forces which might break through. Between 21 May and 2 June a complete army of 179,000 men was gathered and assembled in the region of Vicenza, Padua and Cittadella (Maps 1,2). In the end, however, the Austrians failed to break out from the mountains due to epic Italian resistance at many points along the line. On and near Monte Cengio (1351m, Map 3) a brigade of Granatieri delayed the advance during crucial days between 22 May and 3 June; of the original strength of 6217 men, 951 were killed and 2004 wounded. Such heroic efforts had their effect and on 16 June Conrad decided to break off the attack, and by 26 June the Austrians had drawn back considerably to new prepared positions.

Cadorna now made use of units of the 5th Army to counter-attack from 27 June to 24 July, but in spite of desperate attempts and very heavy losses only limited progress was made in dislodging the Austrians from their new positions. The battle for the salient had now worn itself out. The losses in dead, wounded and missing had been considerable, perhaps 70,000 on each side. Nevertheless by the end of July Cadorna was already returning troops ready for the 6th Battle of the Isonzo which opened a few days later on 4 August. The river was crossed, Gorizia captured, and the Italian front pushed forward into the Carso. But three subsequent battles in September, October and November made little more progress except for some small advances on the northern half of the Carso.

The battles were renewed on much the same lines in 1917. In the 10th Battle of the Isonzo during May and June the Italians extended their bridgehead at Plava down the river to Gorizia, while below Gorizia the line was pushed forward another two or three miles into the Carso. Also in June, an attack in the Trentino salient to capture the region of Monte Ortigara (Map 3) produced little result, but over 23,000 casualties (dead, wounded and missing), of which 13,000 came from only twenty two alpini battalions.⁷ However, the 11th Battle in August and September made a relatively sizeable advance of up to four miles across the Bainsizza plateau and also some further advance on the Carso.

At first sight the results of over two years' fighting on the Isonzo appear rather modest. The great hopes of sweeping on to Trieste and even to Ljubljana and Vienna had not been fulfilled. The Italian army had lost about 200,000 men dead, and very many more wounded, but was virtually no nearer to Trieste. Even so, the results of the 11th Battle of the Isonzo, with its casualties totalling about 26,000 dead and 96,000 wounded, compared not unfavourably with those obtained by the British army struggling in the mud of Passchendaele at about the same time.

Italy, like all the other belligerents, had found herself involved in a war of attrition, which had not been foreseen. Her losses had been grievous and her advances small. Yet Italy had played a considerable role in this war of attrition, so that by September 1917 the Austrian High Command feared that they could not face another Italian attack on the scale of the 11th Battle. Therefore Austria appealed to Germany for help and the German High Command decided that urgent steps were necessary to prevent the defeat of Austria on the Italian front.⁸ Thus began the story of Caporetto.

3. The Breakthrough at Caporetto

Having decided to aid Austria by a joint offensive on the Isonzo the German High Command sent a very able staff officer, General Krafft von

Dellmensingen, to reconnoitre the ground. He had climbed in the Dolomites before the war, and had commanded the German Alpenkorps in the Dolomites in 1915 before Germany was officially in the war. Following his reconnaissance, arrangements were made for a surprise attack against the Italian 2nd Army holding the line in the upper part of the Isonzo valley where at first sight the ground is too mountainous to permit any hope of success.

The Germans planned to attack all along the mountain line from Bovec to the region south of Tolmin with the object of driving across the Isonzo, through the further defences on the far bank, and then perhaps into the Venetian plain. To make a success of this ambitious programme the Germans relied on sound planning, surprise, and the use of first class troops. Sixteen divisions, nine Austrian and seven German including the Austrian Edelweiss Mountain Division and the German Alpenkorps, were grouped together to form the XIVth Army under the German general Otto von Below and assembled secretly behind the front.

An army at war may succeed in spite of mistakes and ill fortune, provided these hazards come in moderation, but before and during the opening stages of the Battle of Caporetto everything went wrong for the Italians. The region of the Upper Isonzo is so mountainous that it seems to have been regarded as a relatively safe sector. The English historian G.M. Trevelyan, who directed an ambulance unit working with the 2nd Army, wrote that the region was regarded as a rest area.⁹ It is also said that disaffected factory workers who had been called up had been sent, rather unfortunately, to this quiet sector.¹⁰ Thus the troops on the ground were not the best units in the Italian Army and during the past two years had had little or no experience of either defence or attack.

The Italian Army was further handicapped by divided councils in the High Commands. As early as 18 September Cadorna had decided against a further offensive in 1917, and had ordered that all the troops on the Isonzo should adopt a defensive posture ready to deal with any Austrian attack.¹¹ Action was taken immediately by the 3rd Army on the lower Isonzo between Gorizia and the sea, commanded by the Duke of Aosta,¹² but not by the 2nd Army on the upper Isonzo, commanded by General Capello.¹³ Relations between Capello and Cadorna were not good and Capello preferred offensive to defensive operations.

Few preparations were made by the 2nd Army until evidence began to arrive on 9 October suggesting that German and Austrian troops were considering an offensive in the region of Tolmin. In fact effective preparations began only in the last week or so when more troops were hurriedly brought up to the front in movements which the Italian Official History describes as "tumultuous in the final two days".¹⁴ Moreover, between 5 and 19 October Cadorna was away from his headquarters at