

Gorizia, Battle of

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The Battle of Gorizia, known as the Sixth Isonzo's Battle, was fought by the Italian Third Army against the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army between 6 and 16 August 1916. It resulted in the Italian occupation of Gorizia. This was overemphasized by the Italian press, although it did not lead to strategic changes on the front line.

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Background

The discouraging evaluations of Italy's first year at war are a key element needed to comprehend the importance of the Battle of Gorizia in the country's narrative of the Great War. Contrary to the realities of the conflict, in 1915 the Italian public expected a short and victorious war. In fact, over the course of 1915 the Italian Army was only able to occupy those portions of Austria that had been abandoned by the Austro-Hungarian Army for defensive reasons. The five battles fought along the Isonzo River up until March 1916 did not bring to any changes to the front line. The situation became worse after the *Strafexpedition*, an offensive organized by the Austro-Hungarian Army in May-June 1916, which the front line in south-eastern Trentino to be moved back.

Thus, the results of Italy's first war year appear to be negative. As the true nature of the conflict unfolded, soldiers suffered because of the Italian Army's lack of preparation. Moreover, almost all of the war's participant states considered the conflict a "defensive war", thereby cementing the home front. The Italians on the other hand considered it a "war of conquest" but after a year there were no victories to celebrate. The Battle of Gorizia marked a break in this trend both for military and political

reasons.

The Battle

Preparation and forces

Italy's main innovation in the Battle of Gorizia was accurate preparation. For the first time the Italian Army had planned in detail the offensive, taking advantage of know-how learned during the first year at war: the aim was to avoid a traditional frontal assault by optimizing human and technological resources.

The key elements of this strategy were the distribution of the heavy [artillery](#) fire and the ability to hide the arrangement of the offensive. The Italian Army was able to bring to the front line about 1,200 pieces of artillery – 400 of them middle- and large-calibre – and 800 bombardars. About 920 of these artillery pieces were placed within an area of eight kilometers where the main attack was to be launched. The Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army could only amass 640 artillery pieces and 333 bombardars. The same proportions are reported for troops: the Italian Third Army could muster sixteen divisions (220 battalions) thanks to a rapid repositioning of about 300,000 soldiers from Trentino to Isonzo Valley; the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army could manage eight divisions (106 battalions, most of them incomplete), due to the Austro-Hungarian war effort in Trentino and in Bukovina where they were attempting to stop the Brusilov offensive. In this context, the Austrian Army could take advantage of the good defensive positioning of their trenches.

The goal of the Italian offensive was to conquer the Austro-Hungarian bridgehead to the west of the Isonzo river and to occupy the three hills of Sabotino, Podgora and San Michele. This occupation would have enabled the Italian Army to threaten Gorizia with artillery fire and prevent the Austro-Hungarian Army from settling in the city.

Battle and Results

The offensive was launched on 6 August 1916, after an intense bombardment concentrated on the high ground of Sabotino, Podgora and San Michele. Within an hour, Sabotino was conquered by the troops of [Pietro Badoglio \(1871-1956\)](#), who took advantage of the intense bombardment of this area. Italian soldiers had also been moving forward to Podgora and San Michele but there the Austro-Hungarian counterattack blocked their advance after they had conquered the hills.

The battle's turning point came due to the Fifth Austro-Hungarian Army's lack of reserves. On 8 August General [Svetozar Boroević von Bojna \(1856-1920\)](#) was forced to order the evacuation of the bridgehead west of the Isonzo. As a consequence, the 58th Austro-Hungarian Division withdrew towards the eastern bank of the Isonzo and arranged a new defensive line 1.5 kilometers to the east of Gorizia. The same happened between San Michele and Monfalcone which were about fifteen kilometers south: on 9 August Boroević commanded the withdrawal of the 17th and 20th *Honvéd*

Divisions to the second trench line, placed about five kilometers to the east. On the same day, the Italian troops could occupy the city.

From 10 to 16 August, [Luigi Cadorna \(1850-1928\)](#) tried to transform this local advance into a strategic success. However, the impossibility of transporting artillery quickly to the east of the Isonzo due to lack of bridges prevented the Italians from breaking through the second Austro-Hungarian defensive line. Moreover, Boroević was able to strengthen his trench lines thanks to the hesitations of the Italian troops and by taking advantage of the arrival of reinforcements. Therefore, on 16 August Cadorna decided to stop the offensive. The Italian and the Austro-Hungarian Army counted 51,200 and 37,500 [casualties](#) respectively.

Consequences and Evaluations

For the first time after fifteen months of war, the Italian Army was able to overcome the Austro-Hungarian defensive system at the Isonzo Valley. Above all, the conquest of Gorizia had great political value since this was the first Austrian city occupied by the Italian Army.

The Italian press emphasized enormously this conquest, although it was clear that beyond Gorizia there were new Austro-Hungarian trenches and this was just a break in a [war of attrition](#). Though glorified, Gorizia was not a strategic goal and its conquest did not change the conduct and aims of Italy's war. It comes, therefore, as no surprise to learn that the international press paid modest attention to this battle. For the Austro-Hungarian Army, the loss of Gorizia represented merely a symbolic defeat and the push-back of the front line did not subvert the defensive system in this area: the real threat for the Austro-Hungarian *Armeeoberkommando* in August 1916 was the Brusilov offensive in Bukovina.

In a wider perspective, the Battle of Gorizia can be read as a turning point in the Italian war narrative. The Italian home front and Army had been looking for victories and heroes to give credence to the idea of a "war of conquest". For the first time, an offensive reached its goals. [Italian propaganda](#) found in [Enrico Toti \(1882-1916\)](#), a volunteer killed on 6 August, a hero to glorify. Therefore, even if this battle did not lead to real strategic changes, it became part of the Italy's representation of its participation in the Great War.

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