

THE ISONZO

1915

Overview

In 1915 the opposing commanders on the Isonzo Front each seemed to understand a single, but different, principle of warfare to the exclusion of all others. The Italian Comando Supremo dominated by Luigi Cadorna applied the Principle of the Offensive — that only through offensive action can decisive results be achieved — to all their strategy. In a half-year they would mount four major attacks against their foe.

Facing them, General Borojevic practiced the Principle of Simplicity to the maximum. His strategy was strictly defensive and he issued only one directive: “The troops should construct positions, place obstacles in front of them and remain there.” Given his highly defensible position — one requiring river crossings and assaults against high mountains by his enemy — this approach kept the General, known to his troops as the Croatia Thickhead, out of trouble at first. It was, however, a tribute to the determination of the individual Italian soldier and the willingness of his leaders to spill his blood that by the end of the year, Borojevic’s Fifth Army was just barely holding on to its position, requiring reinforcement by twelve divisions from other fronts.

Indeed, the Austrians also had the utter exhaustion of their adversaries to thank for surviving 1915. While Cadorna remained true to that single Principle of the Offensive, he repeatedly demonstrated ignorance of two other important, complimentary Principles:

Mass - Applying the maximum combat power at the point of decision; and

Economy - Applying the minimum essential means at points other than at the point of decision.

In 1915, the Italian commanders attacked positions up and down the sixty mile long Isonzo Front. By attacking everywhere, they were unable to concentrate ‘Mass’ anywhere and they physically and emotionally enervated their own forces. Their assaults were almost always uncoordinated, often piece-meal and usually mounted with inadequate artillery fire to back the infantry. Also, since the Austrians often occupied the higher positions the attacks usually failed to surprise them since they had been watching the preparations all along. As a result, in about six months Italy’s Second and Third Armies would suffer 250,000 killed, wounded and captured along the Isonzo. The areas of operations shifted widely for each of the year’s four major battles, but heavy casualties and a lack of notable progress characterized all of them.

First Battle of the Isonzo June 23 - July 7, 1915

The battle began in similar fashion to the French and British attacks of early World War I on the Western Front with an inadequate, week-long artillery barrage the length of the front. Some early successes were achieved. The massif of Monte Krn [Mte Nero] was partly occupied, the heights around Plezzo in the North were captured and Mte Colowrat opposite Tolmino was also taken. However, the inability to drive the Austrians from the rest of the high ground west of Tolmino and the River would one day haunt the Italian Army as this bridgehead would be the launch pad for the catastrophic Caporetto Offensive by the Central Powers.