

By October 1917, the moral and psychological well being — the morale — of the Italian troops on the Isonzo had reached bottom. Certainly, pacifistic and defeatist propaganda from within Italy combining with the Pope's call for the war to end contributed to this. It must have seemed to the mostly Catholic Italian soldiery that everyone but their generals thought the war was a bad idea. Additionally, the brutal treatment they received from the high command ranging from frequent executions to a policy of minimal leave time furthered the sense of oppression. Also, as pointed out by historian Luigi Villari, there was a problem of isolation primarily amongst the troops of the Second Army assigned to high mountain posts. He wrote, "These positions were usually on the rougher mountain areas, dominated by an invisible enemy, where. . . Headquarters were unavoidably far from the front line, out of touch with the troops."

But, as far as we can tell from firsthand accounts, it was, most concretely, the endless and apparently pointless war of attrition on the Isonzo that magnified the psychological toll. And, if the first nine battles of the Isonzo had pushed morale downward, the offensives of Spring and Summer 1917 shoved it off of a cliff. In raw life and death terms, the survivors of the nine offensives waged through the end of 1916 had seen about 70,000 of their comrades killed. In the two offensives of 1917 they would see 76,000 more die. This accelerating rate of loss must have compounded the doubts and stresses felt by men already trapped in an endless war of annihilation. The Tenth and Eleventh Isonzo Battles of 1917, therefore, are keys to understanding the collapse of the Italian army that followed at Caporetto.

Mte Krn [Mte Nero] with Caporetto [Kobarid] in Foreground  
**Tenth Battle of the Isonzo**  
**May 12 - June 8, 1917**

By 1917 Italy had agreed to coordinate its operations with its allies. Spring of that year was to be the occasion of a decisive breakthrough on the Western Front to be led by French general Robert Nivelle. Italy, therefore, also had to plan for a decisive breakthrough in its only feasible area for offensive operations, the Isonzo. The usual priority, expansion of the Gorizia corridor for a further push to Trieste, was this time turned into a diversionary part of a broader attack. For mysterious reasons, in early 1917 Comando Supremo seemed bent on capturing as many mountains as possible. Moving from North to South, they engaged in an indecisive war of mines for control of Mte Krn's peak east of Caporetto. The largest assault [sound in its thinking, but weak in execution] on the Tolmino bridgehead began on May 15th and failed. Mte Kuk and Mte Vodice near Plava were successfully captured, but Mte Santo across the river from Mte Sabatino was not.

As the main battles in the north staggered to conclusion, Third Army was ordered to attack again on the Carso. After some initial progress, they reached the outskirts of Mte Hermada in the last days of May, but eventually were halted by stiff Austrian counterattacks on June 6-8. Units of the Catanzaro Brigade refused to advance in a last futile attack on Mte Hermada and were subsequently formally decimated as punishment in July. After taking 157,000 casualties [killed, wounded and captured] it was time for General Cadorna to adjourn the blood letting.

Bridgehead at Tolmino  
Austrian Forces Occupied Both Sides of River

**Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo**  
**August 19 - September 12, 1917**

Unable to clear the Austrian 5th Army off the dangerous Tolmino Bridgehead, Comando Supremo developed a plan for both flanking that position and threatening the enemy's rear marshalling areas, possibly even gaining another route to ever-elusive Trieste. The objective was to capture the Bainsizza Plateau southeast of Tolmino. Unfortunately the planners combined this somewhat creative solution with the old standby of scheme for capturing Trieste by just pounding very, very hard through the Carso. Guided by this two-pronged strategy, Italy's Second and Third Armies began the largest of all the Isonzo Offensives on August 19, 1917.