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Piave, Battles of

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The two battles of the River Piave were fought between 10 November and 25 December 1917, and 15-23 June 1918, respectively. The Austro-Hungarian army, supported by German units, tried to bring about the final collapse of Italy. Both offensives were repulsed, marking a turning point in World War I on the Italian front.

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Background

After the [Caporetto defeat](#) (24 October 1917), the Italian army retreated to the Tagliamento line. [Paolo Boselli's](#) (1838-1932) government collapsed and was replaced by [Vittorio Emanuele Orlando's](#) (1860-1952). The new prime minister and monarch, [Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy](#) (1869-1947), met with the French and British prime ministers, [Paul Painlevé](#) (1863-1933) and [David Lloyd George](#) (1863-1945) in the new Allied Supreme War Council at Rapallo (5-7 November 1917) and Peschiera (8 November 1917) to discuss contingency plans to prevent a general collapse of the [Italian front](#). On 5 November 1917 the Italian army withdrew from the Tagliamento to the Piave River.

The Italian position appeared desperate. Only thirty-three divisions out of sixty-five remained as a

fighting force, and they were to defend the Piave line against fifty Austro-Hungarian and German divisions supported by 4,500 guns. Painlevé and Lloyd George dispatched large reinforcements – ten divisions in total – but insisted that the Italian chief of staff, General Luigi Cadorna (1850-1928) be replaced with a less stubborn commander. Orlando chose Armando Diaz (1861-1928). As Allied reinforcements reached the Italian front they realised that the situation was serious, but not desperate. The Italian pride had been badly shaken, but Italian soldiers seemed determined to redeem themselves.

First Battle, or “Arresto”

The First Battle of the Piave, the *Battaglia d'Arresto*, raged in two phases between 10-26 November 1917 and 4-25 December 1917. General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf (1852-1925), Austrian chief of staff, tried to take Monte Grappa and break through the Piave line before it was reinforced by Allied units.

The Grappa was a naturally strong defensive position, and the Italians managed to hold their improvised positions in freezing winds and dry snow by mounting determined counterattacks. On 22 November 1917 the German *Sturmtruppen* (assault troops) took the Monte Tomba and on 4 December 1917 overran the Melette, but the offensive had lost steam by then. Between 4 and 24 December 1917 the Austrians made a second attempt at breaking the Italian front, but their heavy [artillery](#) lagged behind and the men were exhausted. The Austrian high command, accepting the advice of the Germans, suspended the operation. The Italians launched minor operations at the so-called Tre Monti (Valbella, Col del Rosso, Col d'Echele) and the Grappa on 28-31 January 1918 to rectify their line.

Italian Reorganisation

Diaz had urgent problems with which to deal. He faced an imminent shortage of manpower and [equipment](#). He rounded up the soldiers who had dispersed after Caporetto, resurrecting twenty [infantry](#) divisions and more than thirty artillery regiments by the end of February 1918. Efforts were made to restore morale and [discipline](#) – not least by increasing rations and pay – and to strengthen the Italian will to fight to the end. A special assault corps called *Arditi* was also created.

Reconstitution of the army was sustained by an unexpected and unprecedented industrial growth in northern [Italy](#) and by a revival of patriotism. In many ways, the invasion and the threat of a total defeat cemented the home front, despite the fact that the Italian people had largely been against the war from the beginning of hostilities.

The contribution of Allied officers to the reorganisation of the Italian army was also important: the entire military doctrine of the *Regio Esercito* was much improved by the introduction of “elastic defence”, and improvements in the use of artillery and [airpower](#). Other Allied support in the form of munitions, shipping and extra loans ensured against coal and [food shortages](#). Finally, an inter-Allied

commission for front propaganda was established at the new Italian headquarters in Padua in order to undermine the unity of Austria-Hungary's multi-ethnic army.

Second Battle, or “Solstice”

The growing domestic crisis in the Habsburg Empire sped up Austrian preparations for a final offensive aimed at bringing about Italy's military collapse. With [Russia](#) out of the war, Vienna concentrated all of its reserves in Italy. The Austrians were divided in two army groups: Army Group Tyrol (10th and 11th Army) under Conrad von Hötzendorf in the north; Army Group Piave (6th Army and 5th *Izonoarmee*) under General Svetozar Borojević von Bojna (1856-1920) in the south. The former aimed at seizing the Altipiani so as to flank the bulk of Italian forces on the Piave; the latter insisted that the main thrust be launched on the Piave in order to isolate the Grappa sector. The final plan resulted in a two-pronged attack which dispersed the Austro-Hungarian forces.

The Austrians gathered fifty-eight divisions supported by 5,000 guns, as opposed to fifty-five Allied divisions, including five Anglo-French divisions, supported by 4,500 guns. However, some Austrian divisions were incomplete and suffering shortages of munitions and supplies. The Italians had other advantages, namely the ability to hold nineteen divisions in reserve and use interior lines to concentrate them where needed.

Conrad von Hötzendorf's army group mounted a preliminary attack to conquer the contested Tonale pass at the western extremity of the front on 13 June 1918, but made little progress. The main offensive began two days later. The Italians had gathered precise intelligence on the enemy plan and opened up half an hour before the Austrians, slaughtering their forces as they moved into position for the attack. On the Asiago plateau, Conrad's forces broke into British and French lines, but were repulsed by the end of the day. The Austrians conquered the Tre Monti and broke through the Italian IX corps on the Grappa, but were contained and then pushed back by furious counterattacks by the IX assault group under General Giovanni Messe (1883-1968).

Borojević von Bojna's attack across the River Piave enjoyed more success in its early stages, as 100,000 Austrians successfully crossed the river, establishing bridgeheads on the western bank. However, the Italians adopted “elastic” defensive tactics and absorbed enemy thrusts in a deep system of trenches. Having contained the northern threat, Diaz deployed his reserves southwards against the Austrians' bridgeheads. The Italians attacked the Austrian pontoons with [aircraft](#) and artillery fire. After nine days of fighting, Borojević von Bojna ordered the retreat across the river to avoid the complete annihilation of his bridgeheads.

Consequences and Evaluations

The battle cost the Italians 85,000 dead, wounded and [prisoners of war](#). The Austrian losses amounted to 143,000 men. At the end of June 1918, minor Italian counteroffensives recaptured most

of the ground that had been conquered by the Austrians, including the Tre Monti. Although an essentially defensive victory, the Piave was celebrated across Italy as a miracle by a jubilant population which swore a collective oath “to resist, bearing any sacrifice, until victory”. As [John Gooch](#) has recently commented, the Italians had achieved more than either they or their allies had realised at the time. The Austrians dated the beginning of their collapse from the failure of the Piave, and General [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) also saw it as the end of any Austrian threat to Italy.^[1]

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Section Editor: [Marco Mondini](#)

Notes

1. ↑ [Gooch, John: The Italian Army and the First World War, Cambridge 2014, p. 282.](#)

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