

Pre-war Military Planning (Italy)

By [Filippo Cappellano](#)

From 1870 to 1914, given the inferiority of the Italian army with respect to that of the Habsburgs, Italian war plans maintained a defensive or counteroffensive posture. In the period of neutrality, however, Luigi Cadorna, reckoning that the Austro-Hungarian army would be able to deploy only a limited part of its own forces, decided to reverse the Italian strategy, imparting a markedly offensive character to the plans. An offensive in the direction of the Gorizia and Trieste regions was thus planned, with the aim of inflicting a decisive defeat upon the Austro-Hungarians. The realities of the war, however, would hold up the Italian forces for many months on the Isonzo front, up until Caporetto.

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Introduction

From 1870 to 1914, given the marked superiority of the opposing army in troops and [equipment](#), and in light of the bitter wartime experience of the past, Italian action against the Dual Monarchy was informed by an exclusively defensive/counteroffensive concept. Steps were first of all taken to overhaul the general organisation of the army, to extend the railway network in the Veneto, to construct barrier forts along the main invasion routes and to defend the Tagliamento. The possibility then began to be glimpsed of assembling and deploying part of the forces along this latter river. In any case, it was still on the Mincio, the Adige, the Piave and the Tagliamento that the enemy assault was expected, the hope being that it might be broken up by means of a resolute defence and a counterattack.^[1]

[Luigi Cadorna](#) (1850-1928), drawing inspiration from a 1885 operational design sketched out by [Enrico Cosenz](#) (1820-1898), conceived an ambitious offensive plan, which envisioned an invasion of [Austria-Hungary](#) relying upon the cooperation of the Russian and Serbian forces.^[2] This was perhaps a somewhat too ambitious goal given the actual offensive capabilities of the Italian army, at this period very short of medium/large calibre [artillery](#) and automatic [weapons](#). Consequently Cadorna's plan failed, along with all the others conceived by the forces of the Central Powers and of the Entente in 1914-1915.^[3]

Enrico Cosenz's plans of 1885 and 1889

After 1870, and once the southern provinces had been pacified and the Roman question resolved, the Italian army could

dedicate itself more wholeheartedly to war plans against the neighbouring powers. Up until 1882, however, the numerous studies undertaken by bodies such as the Permanent Commission for the General Defence of the State (*Commissione Permanente per la Difesa Generale dello Stato*), the Committee of the General Staff (*Comitato di Stato Maggiore Generale*), the General Staff Secretariat (*il Corpo di Stato Maggiore*), and the Commission for the Systematisation of Defence in the Theatre of War in the North-East (*la Commissione per lo Studio della Sistemazione a Difesa nel Teatro della Guerra a Nord-Est*) remained at the level of vague operational understandings, without ever leading to a detailed war plan.^[4] In broad outline the prevailing concept was, in the event of war with Austria, strictly defensive, stipulating an initial deployment set very far back, at first on the Mincio-Po line, then on the Adige, exploiting the hallowed “Quadrilateral” of Risorgimento fame.

1882, a year that saw Italy join the Austro-German [alliance](#), was a watershed both in the field of international relations and in the organization of the armed forces. The post of Army Chief of Staff was created, whose particular responsibility it was to draw up the war plans. The alliance, which was renewed several times (the last occasion being in 1912), was designed to secure Italy from any aggression on the part of Austria, and therefore to release her from the need to prepare plans for army mobilisation on the north-east frontier. Yet Austria-Hungary, year by year, proceeded to intensify military manoeuvres on the Italian border that indicated very precise offensive intentions. From 1907 onwards, the manoeuvres had become so blatantly threatening as to confirm the suspicion that Italy’s ally intended to profit from the first favourable opportunity to attack. The proposal to mount a pre-emptive attack against Italy, formulated on several occasions by General [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#), stood every chance of proving successful, whether on account of the numerical (and other) superiority of the Austro-Hungarian army over the Italian army, or because of the absence of permanent defensive works on the frontiers of the Kingdom of Italy. From the moment that the Triple Alliance had been signed, the army Chief of General Staff, General Enrico Cosenz, had scrutinised the chequerboard of North-Eastern manoeuvres with a view to a possible Austrian attack.

General Cosenz was well aware of the shortcomings of the defensive organisation along the Triestine salient, and of the likelihood of the enemy advancing in overwhelming numbers from the Isonzo river. He therefore deemed it prudent to assume, in a first stage, a defensive posture both on the [Trentino](#) front and on the Friuli front, in order subsequently to take the offensive, once the enemy assault had been repulsed. For the deployment of the bulk of the army, Cosenz had chosen the line of the Piave. In 1885, Cosenz took into consideration two distinct possibilities: that of Italy and Austria fighting a war on their own, and that of Italy waging a war, in an alliance with another power, against Austria. In the former case, the army would have initially to assume a defensive posture both on the Piave and on the Trentino and Cadore fronts, save for minor and piecemeal offensives in order to conquer objectives that were close at hand (Lavarone and Dobbiaco).

It is of particular importance to analyse the second plan considered by General Cosenz in relation to a war of coalition against Austria-Hungary. For this same plan later inspired the operational memoir drafted by Cadorna in August 1914 that would serve as a foundation for the offensive action conducted by the Italian army at the time of the country’s intervention in the war in May 1915. According to Cosenz, with Austria engaged on another front, the Italian army would be able to go on the offensive, relying upon the superior numerical strength of its own forces. The objective of the plan was the march on Vienna, to be conducted either along the line of advance defined by the Isonzo or by way of Tarvisio.^[5]

For almost two decades the guiding concepts of assembling forces on the north-east frontier, of their deployment and of the conduct of operations did not undergo any substantial modifications. Only certain details relating to their execution would change, following the improvement of the railway network, the strengthening of the army and the consolidation of the fortifications on the frontier.^[6]

Tancredi Saletta’s plan of 1904

The various types of mobilisation and defensive deployment envisaged against Austria-Hungary had remained wholly theoretical up until the end of 1903; in other words, no guidelines had been laid down for their practical realisation. Only in spring 1904, thanks to the new chief of the general staff, General [Tancredi Saletta \(1840-1909\)](#), was the first plan for a north-eastern mobilisation and deployment sketched out. In this plan, given that the Dual Monarchy, relying upon the many fortifications erected in recent years, could deploy in the field the greater part of the forces stationed in Trentino, the decision was taken to reinforce the defence of the salient in question. Due to the limited capacity of the railway network and the large number of [transports](#) (3,010 convoys) needed for the general assembly, this latter, even though speeded up, required twenty-six days.^[7]

In July 1906, when it was learnt that the enemy, through the adoption of special measures of covert preparation, could carry out their mobilisation in significantly fewer days, and therefore easily pre-empt the Italian advanced occupation, various adjustments were made. However, even this second plan permitted a gain of only one day in the overall duration of the deployment (from twenty-six to twenty-five days), and of two in the completion of the advanced occupation (from fifteen to thirteen days), thereby reducing the number of railway transports (2,772), along with that of ordinary troop movements.^[8]

Alberto Pollio's plans of 1909 and 1913

In July 1909, as a consequence of alterations made to the composition of the army, to the forces allocated for the advanced occupation, and to the combining of the army corps within the various armies, the new army Chief of Staff, General Alberto Pollio (1852-1914), drafted a third plan for assembly, an enhanced version of the one devised in 1906. Through an improved subdivision of the movements involved, the complete marshalling of the army was reduced from twenty-five to twenty-three days, although the total number of transports required was increased to 3,293.

Overall, in order to guarantee a better protection of the left flank of the deployment on the Piave, the whole salient of the Trentino and the Cadore, a front that in the previous operational plans had been assigned to one army plus an autonomous army corps, was divided between two armies. Up until 1909 the criteria informing the army's marshalling and deployment would remain essentially unchanged. The aim was thereby to obtain, through an advanced, numerically strong and rapidly assembled occupation, protection for the bulk of the army deployed on the Piave, which was designed to repulse on the spot the enemy offensive, thereupon launching, in a second stage, a counteroffensive in whatever direction circumstances suggested or dictated.

Later, however, the defensive organisation on the frontier was consolidated, by means of an ambitious plan conceived by General Pollio involving the construction of armoured forts. Consequently, in 1909 the General Staff High Command became convinced that it could *a priori* rule out the possibility of an invasion of Italy at the outbreak of hostilities across the stretch of territory extending from the Stelvio to close to the Carnic Pre-Alps. It therefore decided to impart an offensive character to the initial operations in the Trentino and the Cadore, while maintaining a defensive posture on the Friuli front. In the 1912-13 plan Pollio thus moved the deployment of the two armies placed to defend the sector of the plain forwards from the Piave to the Tagliamento.^[9] The mobilisation and deployment of the army, thanks to noteworthy improvements made to the railway network extending into the Veneto, took twenty-three days, that is to say the same numbers of days taken by the 1909 plan, although the transports had increased in number (4,607).

Luigi Cadorna's Operational Plan in 1914-1915

General Luigi Cadorna, having succeeded Pollio as Chief of Army General Staff just as the storm-clouds were gathering and the peace of Europe was about to be shattered, was subject in his first weeks in his post to the political and diplomatic uncertainty prevailing in Rome. War against [France](#) (were adherence to the Triple Alliance to be confirmed), and war against Austria were interconnected. General Cadorna, however, was soon persuaded that the new international military and political situation in Europe offered Italy the possibility of confronting the Dual Monarchy without the latter being able to direct the totality of its forces towards what for Vienna was the south-western front. In view of this probable intervention, Cadorna conceived an operational plan inspired by openly offensive criteria, namely, to confront the enemy army on its own national territory, aiming at the heart of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.^[10]

On 21 August 1914 the army Chief of General Staff had already clearly laid down an operational plan in the form of a "memoir summarising an offensive action against the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy during the current European conflagration".^[11] General Cadorna took into account here the current European situation, the means at his disposal, and the stationing of the army after the planned mobilisation and deployment then under way. It was thereupon decided that the main thrust of the Italian offensive should be from Friuli towards the Gorizia and Trieste regions, the only direction that lacked permanent Austrian fortifications, and in which there was some hope of encountering the mass of the enemy forces. Cadorna intended to take the bulk of the forces at his disposal on the route that was most direct and least strewn with obstacles, aiming to strike at the heart of the Habsburg Monarchy and to defeat its armies in a battle of annihilation.^[12]

The Trentino, despite the huge value it had assumed in military and political terms, could only be a secondary objective in the context of a partial invasion. It was to be subordinated to the task of ensuring an effective defence, and above all to the principle of *a priori* not dissipating on several contemporaneous objectives the bulk of the forces to be employed against the principal objective. A concentric action starting out from the Tonale and the Cadore in order to cut off the entrenched field of the Trentino wedge, did in fact encounter grave logistical problems. This was due to the difficulties involved in massing suitable forces in mountain zones sorely lacking in lines of communication, and where the enemy could easily block the alpine passes using very modest forces, which could also be supported by various works of permanent fortification.^[13]

The principal action was to be launched by the bulk of the army (the 2nd and 3rd Armies) from Monte Maggiore to the sea, and as rapidly as possible, although the decision was first of all taken to set aside the forces that would be needed to parry the threat from the Trentino. Then, in order to render this mass effective and able to withstand the shock, a number of additional units were marshalled to bolster the strategic deployment of the army in the field. The units thus transferred included those formerly intended to make up the observer corps on the northern frontier, the XI army corps formerly assigned to Apulia, and all the elements allocated to coastal defence and to various strongholds which, on account of the new political and military situation, would now be made available. The decision was also taken to reinforce the mass with artillery, and to have it deployed directly on the Tagliamento rather than on the Piave. The High Tagliamento-But-Degano-Fella sector, which in the planned offensive had been vested with a special, independent function and constituted as a large, autonomous unit, the *Zona Carnia*, would no longer be subordinated to the 2nd Army but become directly subordinate to the Supreme Command (*Comando supremo*). The tasks of the various armies were then defined as follows:

- 1st Army – from the Stelvio to Monte Lisser (inclusive): defensive, although without ruling out partial local offensives designed to safeguard the Italian frontier;
- 4th Army – from Monte Lisser (exclusive) to Monte Paralba: if circumstances were propitious, offensive from the High Piave towards the Pusteria. The objective here being to cut the Alto Adige Trentino's communications with the rest of the Monarchy, or to contribute (in the Pusteria) to possible offensive actions of troops in the Carnia towards Tarvisio;
- *Zona Carnia* – from Monte Paralba to Monte Maggiore: in a first stage defensive with regard to the High Tagliamento-But-Degano-Fella valleys, but then offensive against the forts of Malborghetto, Plezzo (Flitsch) and Predil;
- 2nd and 3rd Armies – from Monte Maggiore to the sea: offensive; first objective, to capture the line of the Isonzo, having first occupied the heights of the Kolovrat and of the Coglio. Subsequently, once the *Zona Carnia* had besieged the forts that stood in the way of our holding Tarvisio, they would advance along the line of the Sava river between Krainburg and Ljubljana, proceeding then either against the enemy forces or in whatever direction was reckoned to be most appropriate.^[14]

The plan stipulated the deployment of fourteen divisions along the ca. 500 kilometres from the Stelvio to the Carnia, together with a further fourteen divisions gravitating towards the main front of the Isonzo (about ninety kilometres) and seven divisions in reserve oriented in the direction of the main attack.^[15] In his operational plan of August 1914 Cadorna adopted Cosenz's 1885 plan as his own, while at the same time making a few corrections.^[16] Although the guiding principles of the action remained the same, Cadorna reckoned to aim the brunt of the attack at the Isonzo, forbearing therefore to conquer the Trentino. Although recognising the threat posed by the Trentino salient for the bulk of the army engaged further to the east, a contemporaneous attack upon the fortified defences of the entrenched field of Trento and upon the adjacent works was reckoned to be incompatible with a determined offensive on the Friulian front. The actions against Val Pusteria and the Tarvisio-Villach zone were subject to the realisation of favourable circumstances the precise nature of which were not really spelled out.^[17] All the guiding concepts informing the Memoir summarising the possible offensive operations beyond the Isonzo received a definitive endorsement in the "Directives for army commanders during the period of mobilisation and deployment in the putative offensive beyond the Isonzo" of 1 September 1914.

The concepts ratified by Cadorna in August-September 1914 were not essentially modified prior to Italy's entering the war, but simply adapted, giving rise to two different versions, one drafted when the winter of 1914-1915 was imminent, the other in the spring of 1915. The first set of variants was designed to ensure that any possible winter operations took proper account of the rigours of the season, which would have prevented a major offensive. These variants were spelled out in the "Memoir of 15 October 1915". The second set of variants, from April 1915, reflected the unfolding of the conflict, which in the spring of 1915 saw the Central Empires wrest back the initiative in operational terms. Thus the offensive option, which in Cadorna's 1

September guidelines had been regarded as the only probable one, by April 1915 had ceased to be so. Indeed, one could no longer rule out the possibility that Austria-Hungary, with the collaboration of German troops, might unleash partial attacks at some point on the frontier, thereby forcing the Italian army on to the defensive. Although featuring defensive provisions in the case of sudden local initiatives on the part of the opposing forces, Cadorna's variants of April 1915 served to reaffirm his strongly held conviction that the Italian army, if not compelled to defend itself, should from the beginning of the deployment impart a resolutely offensive character to its action, with a view to surprising the enemy rather than parrying his threats. A new element in the balance of forces, and one particularly favouring a decision to opt for offensive operations, was the expansion of the Italian artillery siege park.^[18]

It was with the above plans that the Italian army entered the war. The 4th Army was launched along with the right wing at the Dobbiaco node, with the left wing on the hills ringing the Gruppo Sella. The *Zona Carnia* was for its part deputed to attack the fort of Malborghetto and the works at Raibl and Predil before directing its forces at Villaco; the 1st Army was to maintain its defensive posture. The 2nd and 3rd Armies, on the other hand, were supposed to secure the outlet eastwards of the line of operations on the Pontebba, together with offensive outlets on the eastern bank of the Isonzo river (plateaux of Bainsizza and Sagrado). The 2nd Army would thus advance towards Monte Stol, Monte Matajur, Kolovrat and Korada, and possibly Caporetto; the 3rd Army towards the heights of Medea, bridges on the Isonzo between Cervignano and Monfalcone, outlets on the left of the Isonzo. Cadorna then intended to consolidate his position on the Sava river and strike at the heart of the enemy nation by carrying on towards Budapest, in conjunction with the Serb advance from the East and the Russian advance from the North.

If Italian tactical doctrine in 1914 was offensive in orientation, like that of the other armies of the Entente,^[19] in the sphere of strategy too General Cadorna reckoned that a combined Italo-Serbian-Russian offensive against Austria-Hungary stood a good chance of succeeding. Cadorna was certainly well aware of the importance of fortifications and of passive obstacles on the battlefield.^[20] At the beginning of 1915, however, he still retained an unwavering faith in the possibility of overcoming Austrian resistance by concentrating the bulk of the Italian army around the lower and middle Isonzo. With the Austro-Hungarian army distracted by the simultaneous offensives launched by Italy's Serbian and Russian allies, Cadorna envisaged a highly favourable relationship of forces at the point of anticipated break-through. This was an advantage that could not, he judged, be offset by the mountainous terrain favouring defence or by the progress made by the Austrians in the construction of fortified works and the extension of barbed wire fences.^[21] Only on the eve of intervention, having grasped the state of crisis besetting the Russian and Serbian armies, did Cadorna have his first doubts as to the outcome of the enterprise. So it was that in May 1915, with a general mobilisation already under way, the guidelines regarding *Procedures for frontal attack in trench warfare in use in the French army* were issued, a document summarising battle procedures for a war of position as applied on the **Western Front** against the Germans. With this publication, the Supreme Command (*Comando supremo*), while reasserting the validity of the principles underpinning Italian offensive doctrine, thought to allow for other eventualities, envisioning the possibility that the front might also be stabilised on the Italian battlefields. The advanced state of the Austrian field fortifications on the *ciglione Carsico*, and the shortcomings of the Italian medium and large calibre artillery, cast doubt upon the actual possibilities of breaking through the lines of an enemy determined to resist, by now used to trench warfare and able to draw upon forces that were far from exiguous. Thus Cadorna's war plan of April 1915, although still offensive in orientation, nonetheless admitted the possibility "that our offensive may come up against stiff resistance and remain paralysed".^[22]

Conclusion

Such were the plans. The realities of war, however, as is well known, led to the Italian forces being halted for months on end on the Isonzo front, up until Caporetto. They were then compelled to turn back and set out once again from the Piave, which according to the plans of some thirty years earlier had been intended to serve as a bulwark against the invasion of Italy.^[23]

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Section Editor: [Nicola Labanca](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Cappellano, Filippo: Piani di guerra dello Stato Maggiore italiano contro l'Austria-Ungheria (1861-1915), Valdagno 2014, p. 152.
2. ↑ Cadorna, Luigi: La guerra alla fronte italiana fino all'arresto sulla linea della Piave e del Grappa, vol. I, Milan 1921, p. 89.
3. ↑ Gatti, Angelo: Uomini e folle di guerra, Milan 1932, p. 127.
4. ↑ Anonymus: L'Esercito Italiano nella grande guerra (1915-1918), vol. II Le operazioni del 1915 (narrazione), Rome 1929, p. 3.
5. ↑ Ruffo, Maurizio: L'Italia nella Triplice Alleanza. I piani operativi dello SM verso l'Austria-Ungheria dal 1885 al 1915, Rome 1998.
6. ↑ Minniti, Fortunato: Perché l'Italia liberale non ha avuto un piano Schlieffen, in Quaderno 1999 della Società italiana di storia militare, Naples 2003, pp. 12-13.
7. ↑ Mazzetti, Massimo: I piani di guerra contro l'Austria dal 1866 alla prima guerra mondiale, in Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito-Ufficio Storico: L'Esercito Italiano dall'unità alla grande guerra (1861-1918), Rome 1980.
8. ↑ Piani di guerra. Studio del col. Bollea, Archivio Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, fondo L-3, busta 38.
9. ↑ Segato, Luigi: L'Italia nella guerra mondiale, vol. I, Milan 1935, p. 101.
10. ↑ Cadorna, Luigi: Pagine polemiche, Milan 1950, pp. 275, 278.
11. ↑ Cappellano, Filippo: Piani di guerra dello Stato Maggiore 2014, p. 102.
12. ↑ Minniti, Fortunato: Cadorna e la guerra nuova, in La guerra italo-austriaca (1915-1918), in: Labanca, Nicola and Überegger, Oswald (eds.): La guerra italo-austriaca, Bologna 2014, pp. 114-115.
13. ↑ Rochat, Giorgio and Isnenghi, Mario: La grande guerra 1914-1918, Bologna 2008, pp. 159-161.
14. ↑ Faldella, Emilio: La grande guerra, vol. I, Milan 1978, pp. 36-38.
15. ↑ Pieri, Piero: L'Italia nella prima guerra mondiale (1915-1918), Turin 1965, pp. 79-80.
16. ↑ Brugioni, Antonio: Piani strategici italiani alla vigilia dell'intervento nel primo conflitto mondiale, in Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito-Ufficio Storico: Studi storico-militari 1984, Rome 1985, pp. 311-318.
17. ↑ The strategic importance of the Tarvisio node had been recognised as early as the Napoleonic period. In the course of the Italian campaign of 1797 the bulk of the French forces marched on Vienna across the Friuli region, in the direction of Tarvisio.
18. ↑ Geloso, Carlo: Il piano di guerra dell'Italia contro l'Austria, in Rivista Militare Italiana 1-2 (1931).
19. ↑ General Luigi Cadorna, having assumed the post of Chief of Army General Staff in July 1914, produced a notably largescale redrafting of tactical criteria, managing to issue in the space of less than a year, and prior to Italy's entering the war, as many as six new sets of guidelines, the most important of which was Frontal attack and tactical training (February 1915). The cardinal principles of the new directives were: the need to exploit the terrain at times by having recourse to entrenchments in order to protect soldiers; the importance of frontal attack in order to breach the enemy front, on account of the extension of the enemy defensive lines which removed all scope for manoeuvre; the need for strict coordination between infantry action and artillery fire. Like his predecessor, General Alberto Pollio, Cadorna thus reaffirmed his complete faith in an offensive posture, justifying it in terms of the advantages afforded by modern weapons, first and foremost the possibility of aiming great masses of convergent artillery fire on a given stretch of front. Attacks therefore needed to be slow and systematic, in order to allow the artillery to prepare for the infantry advance. (Di Martino, Basilio and Cappellano, Filippo: Un esercito forgiato nelle trincee. L'evoluzione tattica dell'Esercito Italiano nella Grande Guerra, Udine 2008).
20. ↑ February 1915 had seen the issue of Guidelines for training regarding battlefield works, which described the characteristics of entrenchments and defensive field preparations employed by the armies of the Entente and of the Central Powers during the opening hostilities of 1914, similar to those then used in siege warfare. In April 1915 there followed the guidelines entitled Summary of the general guidelines for training in fortress warfare (Cappellano, Filippo: La normativa tattica italiana nel periodo della neutralità (luglio 1914-maggio 1915), in Rivista Militare 4 (2014).
21. ↑ The Italian press had in fact got wind of the defensive preparations mounted by the Austro-Hungarians on the border with Italy in the first months of 1915, and they had also realised that the excellent railway network of the Habsburg Empire would enable the Austro-Hungarian High Command to transfer huge forces in the space of a few days from the Russian front to the Carso, Isonzo and Cadore fronts (Cappellano, Filippo: L'Imperial Regio esercito austro-ungarico sul fronte italiano 1915-1918 dai documenti del servizio informazioni dell'Esercito Italiano, Rovereto 2002). Furthermore, Italian military attachés in Germany and in France had reported at length on the war of position that had been attested on the western front at the end of 1914, in part through their having seen the battlefields with their own eyes (Anghelone, Francesco and Ungari, Andrea (eds): Gli addetti militari italiani alla vigilia della Grande Guerra 1914-1915, Rome 2015).
22. ↑ Comando Stato Maggiore Dell'Esercito, Radunata N.E. (Rosso), Varianti alle Direttivi, 1 Settembre 1914 – 1 Aprile 1915.
23. ↑ Gatti, Angelo: La parte dell'Italia. Rivendicazioni, Milan 1926, p. 187.

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