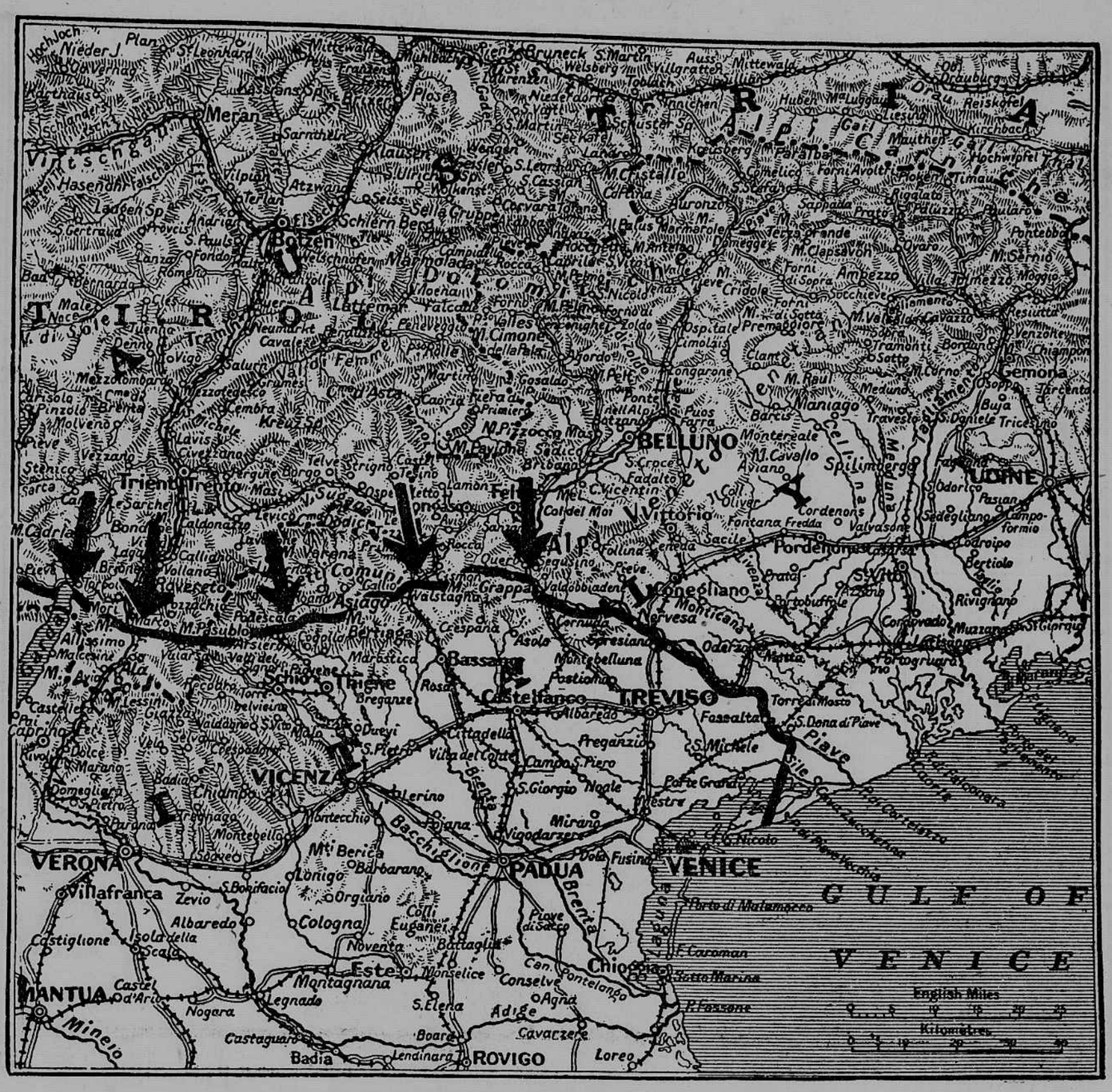
ITALIAN PROSPECTS—THE FATE OF VENICE

Italian Temper Hopeful While Austrian Morale Has Declined—The Whole Operation Is Only a Side Show in the Right Wing of Foch's United Front

By FRANK H. SIMONDS
Author of "The World War," "They Shall Not Pass."

THE ITALIAN FRONT



The arrows indicate probable direction of Austrian attacks. From right to left they mark the valleys of the Piave, the Brenta, the Astico, the Adige and of Lago di Garda. Note how the first three point at the Trento-Vicenza Railroad

ON MAY 14, 1916, a great Austrian offensive was launched against the Italian front between the Brenta and the Astico, that is, from the Austrian Tyrol, south of Trent, and toward the Venetian Plain north of Padua and Vicenza. Now, on May 7, 1918, both Austrian and Italian official reports indicate activities which seem the preliminaries to one more attack in substantially the same region which saw the terrific but abortive offensive of two years ago.

There are two aspects from which it is necessary to view the Italian problem: the military and the political. Certain military results are obviously bound to flow from a great success of the Austrians in Venetia; not less plainly there are certain political considerations which weigh both for and against the making of such an offensive and other political considerations which may flow from the offensive if it succeed.

The Military Aspect

To take the military aspect first: It is clear that we have reached the time of year when weather conditions make military operations in the mountains possible. Last winter such operations were suspended because of the heavy fall of snow which came, far later than usual, to the heavy disadvantage of the stricken Italians, but in time to prevent the Austrians and Germans from achieving the maximum purposes of that campaign upon which they had embarked when they attacked and won the great battle of the Upper Isonzo, which is known to the Central Powers as the Battle of Capretto.

When the campaign ended the Italians had been driven out of all the Austrian territory they had conquered by two years of incessant effort, save a little slice north of the old frontier about Lago di Garda. They had been driven back from the Isonzo to the Piave and out of all the high mountains, the Dolomite, Carnic and Julian Alps, which separate Italy from Austria between Gorizia and the Brenta. They had lost some 3,000 square miles of the Province of Venetia, with a certain number of towns of industrial importance; as it stood then, and stands now, they had lost about half the area which France had been compelled to surrender as a result of her defeats of 1914.

A Contracted Line

When the Austro-German offensive began last autumn the Italian front was nearly five hundred miles long, and its character was exceedingly unfortunate for the Italians, because the Austrians in the Trentine district south of Tyrol were close to the vital communications of the several Italian armies east of the Brenta and holding the semicircular front between the Brenta and the Adriatic.

At the close of the offensive the Italian line had contracted to less than a third of its former extent, and, while the chief disadvantage survived, it survived in a limited form, since that portion of the Italian army fighting with its face to the east was only a few miles beyond the point in its communications nearest to the Austro-German front along the Trentine boundary. Had the Austro-Germans been able to break through between the Brenta and the Astico, after the disaster on the Upper Isonzo, practically all of Cadorna's forces would have been enveloped and captured, because the Austro-Germans would have cut their roads for retreat, the Udine and also the Trieste railways.

Behind the Piave

If you will look at the map you will see that the Italian troops now standing behind the Piave River, from the swamps at its mouth right up to the point where it emerges from the hills east of Monte Grappa, depend for their munitions and supplies mainly upon the railway which comes up from Verona, through Vicenza to Treviso. If the Austrians could cut this railway behind the Piave, these would be in a dangerous position and might be driven southeastward toward Venice and away from the rest of the Italian armies; they might, in fact, be caught in the swamps below Treviso and east of Padua, and be taken.

The Vital Sector

This is the weakness of the present Italian situation. It is excessively unlikely that the Austrians could force the Italians out of their present line along the Piave, which has been fortified during the winter and is as good a line as is necessary to have in our contemporary form of warfare. The strong positions are, on the whole, on the Italian side of the river; the stream is something of an obstacle, and Italian communications behind it are far better than those of the Austrians for rushing reserves to an imperilled sector.

Therefore, it would seem that if the Italians are to be evicted from the Piave position they must be turned out rather than forced out; evicted by a threat to their rear rather than by a drive at their front. In a word, the vital sector is not that behind the Piave, but that between the Piave and the Astico, where the Austrians are hardly more than a dozen miles from the vital railroad. This is the front now mentioned in the dispatches; this is the front on which the Austrians made their great offensive of 1914, which failed because Austrian troops had to be shipped eastward to meet the victorious Russians in Galicia. Here, too, the Austro-Germans were making their supreme effort last autumn and early winter, when the snow came and stopped all operations.

In this sector the Italian situation markedly reproduces that of the French before Verdun in March and after March, 1916, although the scale is much greater. In March, 1916, the French east of the Meuse had temporarily checked the Germans after having to retire over considerable ground. They had good positions in their hands, but they had lost all but the very last series of gun positions on which they could hope to base a successful defence of the forts and hills of the sector east of the Meuse.

As at Verdun

Literally, the French were fighting with their backs to the river, and, as the Germans continued to advance, although with great slowness, the French were pushed down hill toward the Meuse. Now the Austrians, by their offensives of 1916 and 1917, have arrived almost at the edge of the Venetian Plain. The Italians are hanging on to the last of the foothills. If they are pushed off of these, if the Austrians get forward for a distance of less than ten and hardly more than five miles more, either between the Brenta and Astico valleys or between the Brenta and the Piave valleys, then the Austrians will hold all the high ground overlooking the plain and the Italians will have to make a new and very great rearrangement of their lines.

Last year, when there was a prospect of such an advance by the Austro-Germans, there was a general expectation that the Italians would retire behind the lines of the Adige, that is, that they would evacuate everything north and east of this river and stand before Verona and thence behind it to the Adriatic. Such a rearrangement of lines would have meant, would still mean, the evacuation of Venice, of Padua and of Vicenza, and the practical loss of all of the Province of Venetia.

Retreat to the Adige

The long delay due to winter has given the Italians a chance to prepare intermediate lines, recalling the famous "switchlines" of the Hindenburg system in France. Thus, even should the Austrians reach the plain behind the Piave line and between the Piave and the Brenta the Italians might be expected to draw back behind the Brenta and hold the front from Bassano to the sea behind the Brenta. This would mean the loss or the destruction of Venice, because it would bring the Austrian artillery near enough to batter the town to dust. Even if it did not surrender it would mean the destruction of Padua, just behind the Brenta, but it would temporarily save Vicenza. A further Austro-German advance, if we are to assume German troops will be again used, would leave the Italians still able to stand behind the Bacchiglione, but it would mean the surrender of Padua.

An Impregnable Line

All these possible retreats would mean shortening the line and improving the Italian situation on the military side, provided no disaster ensued. It would mean the surrender of famous cities. The moral advantage to the Austrians would be very great, but the military gain would not be commensurate, provided only territory were gained and Italian morale endured the loss of ground and cities, as French morale has survived the similar losses in the French field. Once behind the Adige, the Italian position should be impregnable, for all that natural advantages can supply to make military defence advantageous are to be found in this line, and the Italians have had six months to get ready.

Where Austria Will Attack

As it now stands, it would seem that the Austrians have concentrated strong forces in the Trentino, bringing them down by the great military railroad, which goes under the Brenner Pass in a tunnel and follows the historic route of Teuton invasions of Italy in all past centuries. Having brought his armies south by this route, which is always beyond enemy reach or observation, the Austrian has arranged them in the several smaller valleys leading out from the valley of the Adige to the Venetian plain like the sticks of a fan. He is patently intending to attack by the passes through which the Piave, the Brenta and the Astico emerge into the plain, and he holds all the upper portions of these valleys. He may also be planning a fourth attack right south upon Verona by the Adige Valley, and possibly a fifth along Lago di Garda, but the first four are bound to be the important attacks.

If the Austrian can advance down these valleys for half a dozen miles, sweeping the hills between them as he comes on, he will then have reached the plain on a wide front and will dominate the Italian positions. He will be too near the main line of Italian communications to permit the Italians to remain along the Piave, and they will have to retire behind the Brenta, the Bacchiglione or even the Adige. If the Austrian in his first attack smashes the Italian line as he did at the upper Isonzo, or as Hindenburg smashed the British line in the recent disaster to Gough's 5th Army in Picardy, then the Italian troops along the Piave will have great difficulty in extricating themselves and escaping envelopment and capture, just as they did along the Lower Isonzo after the Capretto disaster, and for the same reasons.

Austria's One Defect

The Austrian will doubtless seek to repeat recent German triumphs. Progress such as the Germans made at Armentières will be sufficient to turn the Piave line and give him Venice and probably Vicenza and Padua. These will be substantial triumphs for an offensive which need not involve any great risks save in the matter of casualties, since his own lines of communication are secure and his own front lacking in all the defects of the Italian.

There is just one defect in the Austrian situation, and that is that because of the mountains there is no good means of communication between the armies in the Trentino and those in the Italian plain. Actually to move troops from one sector to another, hardly more than thirty miles as the airplane flies, necessitates putting them on a train and carrying them around a semicircle of more than three hundred miles. As a result, if the Italians chose to take the offensive on the Piave front, after the Austrian had committed the main mass of his armies to the Trentine operation, it would be several weeks before the Austrian could reinforce the troops in the plain with those in the mountains. The Italians, on their side, have no such difficulty, because all their lines of communications are in the plain and radiate, like the spokes of a wheel, from Castelfranco. Only if they reach the plain can the Austrians unify all their armies on this Italian front.

But any counter offensive by the Italians before they were certain that the Austrian offensive out of the Trentino had been permanently checked would be exceedingly hazardous, for even a victory on the Piave would not remove the danger flowing from the thrust of the Austrian Trentine armies at the Italian lines of communication between Treviso and Vicenza.

Italian Game Is to Wait

It seems to me inevitable, then, that the Italians should play a waiting game. It may involve the loss of Venice, but Venice was as good as lost last year. It may involve a retreat to the Adige, but this was only missed by a hair's breadth last year. The waiting game will abolish the risks of any military disaster by running those incident to a depressed morale and a possible political disturbance following the loss of more Italian territory.

In any event, the Italian field is not the important field; no result in this sector will much affect the decision which must be had in France, and if the Italians stand successfully on the defensive in their own country they will be able to contribute materially to making the result in France decisive. The conquest and elimination of Italy would not much help Germany, because by the time it were brought about, if it could be brought about, America would have arrived in sufficient strength to restore the balance in France, which is, has been and will remain the decisive field.

Prospects Are Hopeful

Now I do not mean to be understood as forecasting any Italian reverse or retreat, any loss of important positions. The news that comes to me of the Italian temper and prospects is distinctly hopeful. There is no gainsaying the rally of Italy after her great disaster of last year. The country has responded to the lash of adversity as it did not answer the invitations of the earlier victories. Moreover, there has been a very real demonstration to Italy of the sympathy and readiness of her allies. British and French troops are still in some numbers in Italy, and their presence last year unmistakably saved Italy from supreme disaster.

Foch's Right Wing

Italy, as her Prime Minister recently said, has become the right wing of the Allied front. With the coming of the unified command on the Allied side Foch has taken over the responsibility of the defence of Italy as well as that of France. What Italy needs in artillery and in munitions Foch will supply, just as he will ask Italy to furnish men, of which she has a superabundance, to aid the Allies in France. Henceforth the Italian front will be just as completely under the care and the direction of Foch as any other sector in that great and single front, which, save for the Swiss interruption, runs now from the Yser to the Piave, from Nieuport to the lagoons east of Venice.

The political questions raised by the prospective Austrian offensive are far less simple to answer than the military. What has Austria to gain by the offensive, even if it prove successful and permit her to advance to the Adige? On the military side she will gain a shorter front and abolish the present separation of her armies in the plain from those in the mountains, and she will temporarily occupy more of Italian territory. The moral effect of the reoccupation of Venice after more than half a century of absence will count for something. But these things are not of overwhelming importance.

Austrian Morale Has Declined

We may say that no Austrian expects to see Hapsburg rule restored in all of Venetia. There has been some talk of annexations in the Friulian districts near the Julian frontier, but this is an improbable outcome and at all events represents the extreme of Austrian purpose. To conquer more ground now, only to evacuate it later, is not to help much, if there be no prospect of an indemnity; and there is no prospect of an indemnity from Italy now or in the future.

The Austrian army did exceedingly well in the offensive last year, although the spearhead of the successful attack was supplied by six or seven German divisions. Since that time there has been a very marked decline in the morale of the Austrian people, and the reports of the conditions in Austria leave no doubt that the great majority of the people are suffering acutely and have no other desire than to make peace.

Austria Is Tending Toward a Breakdown Like That Which Ended Russia

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The Risks of an Offensive

A campaign against Italy now will be a campaign dictated by Germany and conducted for the purpose of relieving the strain upon the main German operation in France and Belgium. Its success will not bring Austria nearer to peace, because it will not affect Britain, France or the United States, with whom now rests the question of peace or war. As for Italy, for her to make peace now would be to confess ruin and suffer something of the fate of Rumania. Italy is henceforth kept in the war by the problems of self-preservation, which are no longer hidden from any element in her population. Last year, when her armies were on Austrian soil and the issues of the war were expressed in Italian hopes for annexation of Irredenta lands, it was quite different. Now peace means the surrender of Italian territory, not the surrender of hoped for acquisitions from the Austrians.

We may fairly conclude that Austria will go reluctantly into a new campaign in which her own interests are not to be served. We may conclude that the morale of the Austrian armies will not be equal even to the morale revealed last year. If, as is most probable, the opening attacks involve huge casualties, the results in the army and in the nation may be of the gravest character. There is a risk which no man can fail to perceive in forcing Austria into a new offensive; and, without forcing, Austria would not and will not take the offensive.

An Empire Nearing Breakdown

Unless all signs fail Austria is now tending toward a breakdown like that which wrecked Russia. Her population, made up of a score of races, contains millions who are actually disloyal and sympathize with the Allies, not the Central Powers. The Southern Slavs and the Italians have recently adjusted mutual rivalries over lands along the Adriatic, Italian claims to which in the past enlisted the Jugo-Slavs in the Hapsburg service. The Czechs of Bohemia have displayed new evidences of their age-long antipathy for the Germans. The Poles have been notoriously dissatisfied ever since the Brest-Litovsk arrangement, so dissatisfied that we now hear that they have had to be placated by a recession of the Cholm district. But such a recession would arouse the Ruthenians and the Ukrainians.

In a word, we know the discordant character of the Austro-Hungarian populations, and we see daily evidences of growing revolt among whole blocks of the population; we know that the economic question is acute, that the food problem is difficult, and we know that the present offensive, if it does come, will be the consequence of external pressure, not of internal policies.

Only a Side Show

Austria was, next to Russia, the weakest of the great nations of Europe at the beginning of the war, and Russian weaknesses have led to a collapse of Russia. It is too soon to indulge in prophecy; Austria has outlived five centuries of prophecy; but it is, at the least, far from impossible that an unsuccessful offensive or a locally successful offensive which costs too much may prove the last straw. At all events, this is a patent possibility of a new Italian campaign, the most important result which can be looked for.

But let us remember at all times that the Italian field is subordinate, that it is a "side show." The fate of the war and of the world will be decided in France and Belgium, and nowhere else, and the war will be won or lost as Germany is beaten or succeeds in her present final bid for a decision. The Italian operation is interesting; it may have important results with respect to the new Europe which is to come; but it will not, on the military side, influence materially the result of the gigantic duel now going on in Picardy and Flanders.