



The Battle of the Piave River 1918

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The Battle of the Piave River comprised the last major Austro-Hungarian attack on the Italian Front and virtually heralded the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian army on the way to the dismantling of the empire.

The main assault, fought between 15-22 June 1918, was prompted by German demands upon their ally to launch an offensive across the Piave river - which was situated a bare few kilometres from key Italian cities such as Venice, Padua and Verona - now that the Russians had **withdrawn from the war**. It was also intended as a belated follow-up to the spectacularly successful combined German/Austro-Hungarian offensive at **Caporetto** the previous autumn.

However the Austro-Hungarian of June 1918 was quite different from the one that had triumphed at Caporetto eight months earlier. It was demoralised, equipment and other supplies were perilously low, and while apparently demonstrating superior numbers of divisions to their Italian counterparts individual unit strengths were notably weakened.

At the same time the Italian army had been the beneficiary of burgeoning Allied war munitions production. Furthermore, incoming Chief of Staff **Armando Diaz** had taken care to deploy adequate defences along the Piave.

However both Austro-Hungarian commanders on the spot - **Borojevic** and former Commander-in-Chief **Conrad** - were in favour of an attack along the Piave (Conrad much more so than Borojevic), although both (in a state of unhelpful rivalry) demanded significant reinforcements before an attack could commence.

This led to newly-installed Chief of Staff **Arz von Straussenberg's** decision to split forces equally between the two commanders, 58 divisions in total (against 57 Italian).

Although the Austro-Hungarians intended to advance in a pincer movement Straussenberg's decision to divide his forces meant that neither commander had sufficient strength in depth to achieve a knock-out blow. Straussenberg determined to open the attack with a direct assault on the river by Borojevic's forces, to be followed with an attack in the Trentino by Conrad.

Thus Borojevic opened the offensive with his Fifth and Sixth Armies on 10 June, crossing the Piave along the coast. His forces had advanced several kilometres in the face of heavy Italian counter-attacks before he was obliged to beat a retreat on 19 June.



However, re-crossing the rapids of the Piave proved problematic and enabled the Italians to attack Borojevic in the flank. By the time Borojevic had successfully re-crossed the river on 22 June his forces had suffered some 150,000 casualties.

Meanwhile Conrad's attacks along the Trentino from 15 June by his Tenth and Eleventh Armies, intended at the capture of Verona, proved of little effectiveness. Faced with strong counter-attacks by the Italian Fourth and Sixth Armies (which included British and French troops) the Austro-Hungarians suffered 40,000 casualties within a week.

The comprehensive failure of the offensive served merely to hasten the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian army, which effectively ceased to exist as a single cohesive force. Its dismantling was finalised by the Italians at the **Battle of Vittorio Veneto** in the autumn.

