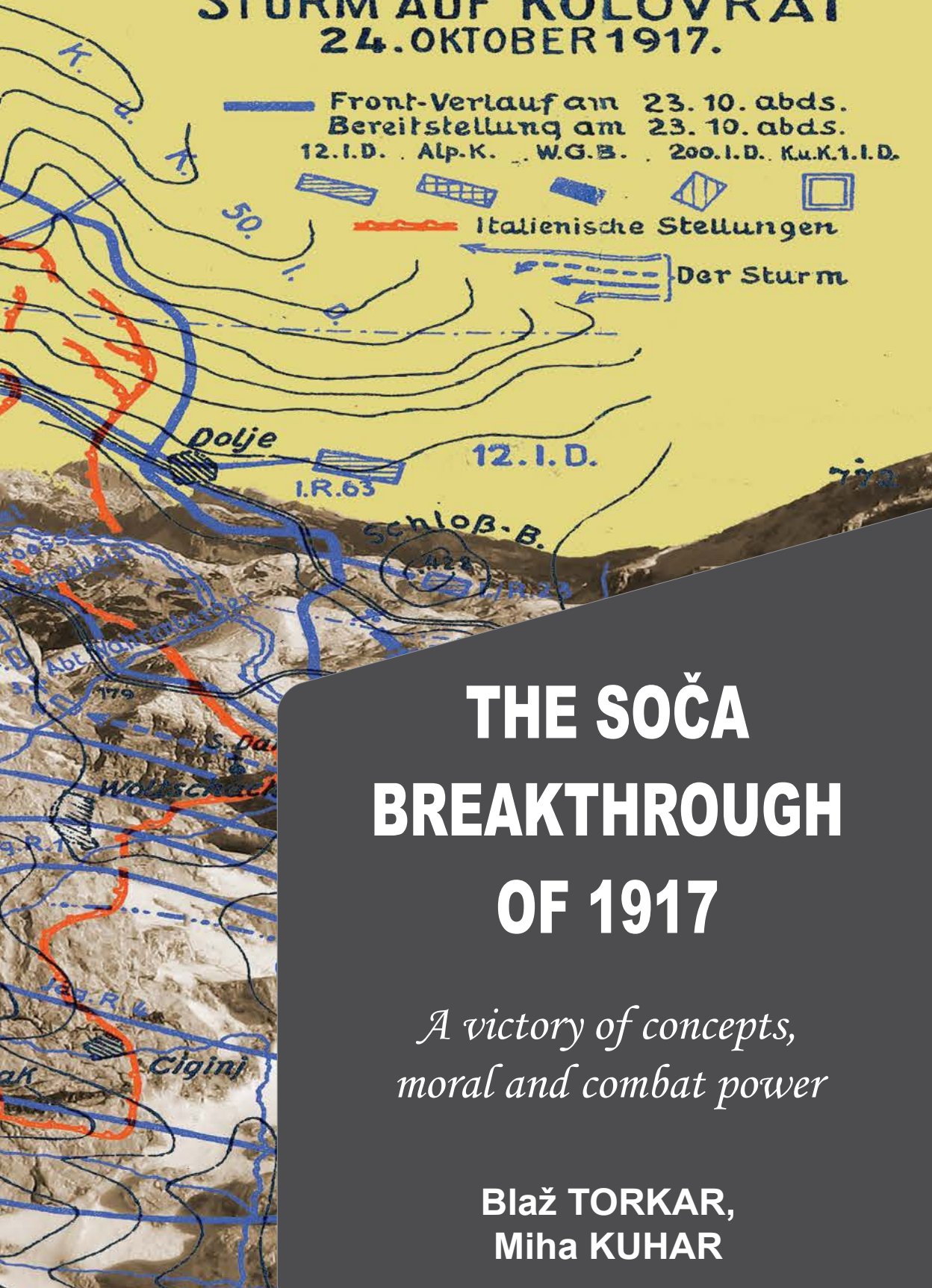


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## THE SOČA BREAKTHROUGH OF 1917

*A victory of concepts,  
moral and combat power*

**Blaž TORKAR,  
Miha KUHAR**



THE SOČA  
BREAKTHROUGH  
OF 1917





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Miha Kuhar

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2023

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a victory of concepts, and moral and combat power**

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## INTRODUCTION

The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive (more often used English term is "Isonzo Offensive") is certainly one of the most well-known military conflicts to take place in Slovenian territory, interesting to the military and civil expert public and numerous laymen to this day. The importance of this historical event is reflected in some domestic, but mainly foreign, publications; however, this does not mean everything about the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive has already been written. After years of study and visits to the locations of the armed conflicts in the Soča Valley, we, the authors, began to ponder on the way of thinking and the decisions of the officers and generals giving commands at the time – a topical subject to this day. We decided to write a book or a case study on the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. We are of the opinion that the time has come for a military scientific monograph on this important military event, part of which took place in Slovenian territory.

In the introductory chapters, we analyze the geographical area of the Upper Soča Region and describe the military and political contexts in Europe in 1917. The Austro-Hungarian and German preparations for the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive; the structure and movement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army to the Soča battlespace; the situation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army before the beginning of the offensive; the fighting power of the German Army; the German style of leadership, command and control, *Auftragstaktik*; mountain warfare; and the development of a breakthrough tactic are described in detail. You will find detailed descriptions of the combat activities of the warring parties, especially in the early days of the conflict, when the offensive was taking place on Slovenian soil. We study reasons for victory and defeat in the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, present new findings on the role of Erwin Rommel in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, and address some of the myths created about the great German army leader. We specifically highlight the reasons for the importance of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive for the military

profession, reflected also in the growing number of foreign military delegation visits to the Soča Region.

We paid particular attention to the German Alpine Corps which was, alongside the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division and the 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division, the most important element of the breakthrough in the Upper Soča Region, and at the same time a holder of innovation in the field of military tactics, leadership, and command and control. We believe that the mountain geographical area of the Upper Soča Region is the exact area where the German and also some Austro-Hungarian mountain and jäger units could fully develop all of their capabilities, which were exceptional also by modern standards.

The characteristics which guaranteed total supremacy on the battlefield were incredible physical and psychological preparedness, mastering the topographical and tactical orientation, understanding of mountain terrain, skills in assault tactics, capability of combined warfare with artillery, leadership, and survivability in bad weather conditions.

The Soča battlefield is an opportunity for carrying out military staff rides. A staff ride is a unique and convincing method of disseminating experience from the past to today's military leaders and participants from military academies. This historical experience gives us a valuable opportunity for the scientific development of military leaders right on the territory where the armed conflicts took place; at the same time, it develops capabilities of multidimensional understanding of the space. The topic is dealt with from both the military-historical and military-scientific perspectives, at the operational and tactical levels. The starting point was the fact that the fighting power of each army was not determined only by the number of soldiers and their armaments; although these are important elements of military victory, they are by no means the only ones. Research was focused also on two other important domains of fighting power. These are the conceptual and moral components, which are actually even more important than physical force. We wanted not only to find answers to what was happening in the Upper Soča Region on those cold October days, but also what was the commanders' way of thinking at the time, which military actions they planned, and what solutions they searched for in the complex environment and apparent war chaos.

We used German and Italian archive sources in our research work. We studied domestic and foreign scientific and specialized literature, and also publications written by direct participants in the armed conflicts. In doing this, we analyzed different, sometimes even contradictory, memories and accounts by the participants in individual events. Backed by modern knowledge from the field of basic military science, we tried to paint a comprehensive picture of the developments in the first few days of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive using comparative analysis, interviews with numerous experts, and direct visits to the locations of individual battles.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive was not a typical military operation, as known elsewhere in World War I. Its implementation was different, innovative; the offensive became, together with the Riga Offensive of September 1917, an example of good practice, already implemented into German doctrinal documents at the beginning of 1918. This doctrine was preserved beyond the end of World War I. At both the operational and tactical levels, before and during World War II, the Germans perfected the tactic of land forces' operations with increased mobility and air forces. The essential innovations of this doctrine were: maximum effect with the minimum use of power, carrying out a penetration tactic deep into the enemy's battle formation simultaneously with coordinated and combined warfare of infantry and artillery and the shattering of the enemy's moral component of fighting power at the operational level. The Germans reinforced all this with a leadership concept, named *Auftragstaktik*. It is especially interesting that this principle of leadership, command and control was revived in the 1980s by NATO Member States' armies, and that it was introduced into the Slovenian Armed Forces' doctrine in 2006 with a mission.

We would like to thank the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia and the Slovenian Armed Forces for enabling the publishing of this book; special thanks also to Lieutenant Colonel Matjaž Bizjak, PhD, and Associate Professor Petra Svoljšak, PhD, who assisted us in writing the book with their expert advice. On the expert level, we were also helped by foreign colleagues: Marco Mantini, Alexander Jordan, PhD, Peter Lieb, PhD, and Wolfgang Mährle, PhD. We would like to thank the translators from the School of Foreign Languages of the Slovenian Armed Forces, Kristina Grilc and Helena Golja

Štamcar, and the proofreader Justina Carey. The regional archive of Stuttgart (Landesarchiv Baden Württemberg – Abteilung Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart), Central Archives of the State (Archivio Centrale dello Stato), the Kobarid Museum, the Walk of Peace in the Soča Region Foundation, the Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia, and colleagues from the Military Museum of the Slovenian Armed Forces also deserve praise.

*Authors*

## PAVING THE WAY FOR A WAR HISTORY STUDY

Similarly to the majority of other European areas, the territory of present-day Slovenia was often “draught-swept”, with the population living through different military challenges in the past. We, as Slovenians, have very few real “domestic” studies of war history. The cause certainly lies in the lack of specialized knowledge for conducting such research and analyses, and of extensive historical knowledge combined with military theory and preferably also a wealth of military operational experience. Before us lies a study, prepared by a historian and a soldier, each with his own contribution. The result is a story which depicts the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive in a significantly different way – in a military way, which ordinary readers may not be accustomed to.

One of the largest armed conflicts on Slovenian soil took place in the Upper Soča Region. Members of many European nations took part in it. Similarly to the Soča Front, the Battle of Kobarid was not integrated into domestic – i.e. Yugoslav – war history until 1991.

The absolute priorities in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were the mountain pasture of Cer, the Kolubara River, a tributary of the Sava, and the mountain of Kajmakčalan on the border of Greece. A study by Colonel Aleksander Daskalović,<sup>1</sup> a translation of General Alfred Krauss’ memoirs<sup>2</sup> and the Italian search for reasons for Giuseppe Prezzolini’s defeat were incorporated into history, which is a success in itself. However, even these studies were available only in a foreign language to the Slovene reader, and in the Cyrillic alphabet.

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<sup>1</sup> A. K. Daskalović: *Bitka kod Kaporeta*, Beograd 1925.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kraus: *Uzroci našeg poraza*, Beograd 1938.

Daskalović and Prezzolini even used an Italian expression for Kobarid<sup>3</sup>; the reason is probably mostly negligence, not a lack of respect.

A lack of knowledge cannot be the reason when analyzing the functioning of Colonel Daskalović, later Division General, who was a nationally conscious Yugoslav and was even called an Italophobe by one of Mussolini's leading propagandists.<sup>4</sup> Daskalović was a great connoisseur of the Soča Valley and the area of the Kobarid breakthrough, since he was a member of the Demarcation Commission for the Rapallo border demarcation north of Rijeka. At first, he was a deputy to General Rudolf Maister; after Maister's sudden retirement, he headed the Commission until a new head was appointed. Undoubtedly, the idea of writing a study on the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive was born during his work. Even in some Commission reports, written by Daskalović, it is explicitly stated that this was within the scope of General Krauss' activity. It should be mentioned that in relation to Daskalović and his "Kaporeto" (Kobarid), the Italian military intelligence service (*Servizio Informazioni Militare*) committed an error – in 1930, when the Chief Inspector of the Royal Yugoslav Army, General Danilo Kalafatović, suddenly retired, they credited Kalafatović with the authorship of Daskalović's study, based on Austrian newspaper sources. How history sometimes plays with people and facts should once again be stressed with Daskalović and Kalafatović, who, as Colonels in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, were involved in the Rapallo border demarcation on the ground, Kalafatović in the southern part (Rijeka) and Daskalović in the northern part. The operational leader of the Italian Commission for the Rapallo border demarcation, whose headquarters were for some time in the very town of Kobarid, was, on the other hand, a promising Colonel Italo Gariboldi who later also published a war-geographical study of the Rapallo border. In the first half of 1941, Gariboldi became the Commander-in-Chief of the Axis Powers in North Africa and was superior to General Erwin Rommel, with whom he came into conflict and was then reassigned to another, equally demanding, operational post. It would be interesting to know whether in North Africa they ever talked about the Soča Valley or Kobarid and their experience related to these areas.

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<sup>3</sup> G. Precolini: *Kaporeto*, Beograd 1921.

<sup>4</sup> V. Gayda: *La Jugoslavia contro l'Italia (documenti e rivelazioni)*, Roma 1941.



Geca Kon, a publisher from Belgrade, invested more effort when publishing Krauss' memoirs and mostly used Slovenian place names. In the leading military newspaper of wartime Yugoslavia, *Ratnik*, the Italian Front was subject to presentation analyses on only a few occasions.<sup>5</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive was not included at all, if we disregard a short article from 1921, meaningfully dubbed "Justifying Cadorna" by the editorial board.<sup>6</sup> The exception, published in 1939, was *Ratnik's* special edition of a tactical study "Operations near Rivers"<sup>7</sup>, also including the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive as one of the case studies. In the military sense, the presentation is quite good. The breakthrough at Kobarid is depicted in general terms only, though greater emphasis is put on the Tagliamento River crossing in combat conditions and the subsequent combats on the Piave River. It should be stressed that Slovenian place names were used in this handbook, including for places on the other side of the Rapallo Border. The reader became acquainted with Stol, Matajur, Soča, Gorica (Gorizia), Tolmin, Trst (Trieste), and so on. After World War II, the memory of the developments in 1917 sank even further into oblivion, because other heroes gained importance.

For many people, me included, the turning point was an exhibition by the Gorizia Museum and Drago Sedmak, organized on the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last Soča Offensive; it presented the topic, almost forgotten by the Slovenes. The year 1991 finally changed our attitude towards the Soča Front with the publication of many different studies and writing on the "breakthrough" at Kobarid.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is certainly one of the most "convenient" topics for a war history study, prepared by Blaž Torkar, PhD and Lieutenant Colonel Miha Kuhar. It allows the study of all three levels of combat operations: tactical, operational and strategic. In this book, the authors mostly stress the operational and tactical levels; however, they also present a general strategic framework of the developments, which is necessary to understand the events. The analysis

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<sup>5</sup> M. Pršić: *Ratnik: časopis za vojne nauke, književnost i novosti (January 1879-March 1941), thematic bibliography*, Beograd 2017.

<sup>6</sup> *Ratnik: mesečni vojni časopis*, Beograd, April-May 1921.

<sup>7</sup> Mars: *Operacije oko reka: biblioteka Ratnika*, Beograd 1939.

includes the personal touch of the authors, since both have dedicated several years to this topic, each in their own way. They complement each other with their knowledge, so the study represents a quality whole. Tactical and historical facts are successfully placed into the geographical area, which they both know well, undoubtedly an advantage of this study. War history studies reflect not only historical facts, but also a personal interpretation, and this analysis is no exception.

The study is mostly based on German sources and memoirs, and only partly on Austro-Hungarian and Italian historical material. This is understandable, because German units were of predominant importance in the Upper Soča Region; on the other hand, the Germans produced a substantial amount of material and wrote many memoirs. The German military school has put emphasis on learning from experience since 1866. On the other hand, the Italian side only studied its own documents and memoir material for a long time, only beginning to familiarize itself with German and Austro-Hungarian sources and memoirs as late as in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

In this study, the operations of the Italian side are presented in the scope that is necessary for the tactical and operational understanding of German and Austro-Hungarian operations. We must be familiar with the activities of the Italian army and its individual units if we want to understand the consequences of the devastating defeat and breakdown which was experienced by a section of the Italian Land Force. The authors did not succumb to the typical Slovenian underestimation of the ordinary Italian soldier, who actually did an excellent job on the Soča battlefield and later on the Piave River. It is my opinion that they perhaps at times overestimate the significance of introducing a new tactic, of assault units and new military equipment. They also play down the internal processes of the Italian army which contributed to the rapid and total breakdown of an otherwise working army system. Internal moral decay as the main reason for the Italian defeat is also defended by one of the main war

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<sup>8</sup> M. Rech: *Da Caporetto al Grappa: Erwin Rommel e il Battaglione da montagna del Württemberg sul fronte Italiano nella Grande Guerra*, Novale 1998.

theoreticians in the inter-war period, Liddell Hart,<sup>9</sup> which is yet again a very simplified view of what was in fact a complex process.

I agree with the authors in that a “new” German approach to leadership, command and control, often misnamed by some Anglo-Saxon authors as a revolutionary change in tactics, greatly contributed to a serious defeat.<sup>10</sup> We should be aware of the fact that such a style of leadership, command and control was not radically new for the German army; German General Friedrich von Bernhardi talked about a change in command that would enable the quality leadership of tactical units in the combat “fog” as early as in 1914.<sup>11</sup> My opinion is that despite everything, the Italian army should have endured by all rules of military operations, and that “the Miracle of Kobarid” should never have happened given the superiority in strength, fortified and dominant positions, and artillery superiority. This was also one of the conclusions of a special Italian Parliamentary Commission, established soon after the front on the Piave River stabilized, and active in Rome until July 1919.<sup>12</sup>

I believe that this war history study will contribute to the actualization of war history, not emphasized enough in the Slovenian Armed Forces. We often use foreign experience, although we have many domestic examples to learn from, experienced and examined in practice by our fathers and grandfathers. In the Slovenian Armed Forces, war history was placed next to patriotic education and motivation for a long time; in this way, history can quickly become distorted, serving war propaganda, which should not be its purpose. These two colleagues, Lieutenant Colonel Kuhar and Dr Torkar, have produced a great work and in my opinion placed history where it belongs in the military profession – in the context of military training and learning from experience.

*Lieutenant Colonel Matjaž Bizjak, PhD*

<sup>9</sup> L. Hart: *The Real War 1914-18*, Boston 1931.

<sup>10</sup> P. Griffith: *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18*, New Haven&London 1994.

<sup>11</sup> F. von Bernhardi: *How Germany Makes War*, New York 1914.

<sup>12</sup> Archivio Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Roma, fondo H-4, Commissione d'inchiesta – Caporetto.

# MILITARY ANALYSIS OF THE GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION IN THE UPPER SOČA VALLEY REGION

## Geographical area

The geographical area is a primary factor of warfare, greatly influencing military activities. Generally, it affects all participants in the battlefield equally. Nonetheless, a person who understands field and weather conditions better, is prepared for them and knows how to use them to their benefit, has an advantage.<sup>13</sup>

“Geographical factors are fundamental to the preparation, leadership, execution and analysis of military activities, and later on also to the situation assessment, decision-making and task fulfilment.”<sup>14</sup> Geographical area directly impacts the choice of objects and targets of attack, movement and control of forces. Efficient use of the geographical area can reduce the effectiveness of enemy operations.

The geographical area in the military sense is divided into strategic, operational and tactical levels. Depending on the size and forces, we use the terms theatre, battlespace and battlefield.

The theatre is part of a global space in which military activities are executed together with all the military potential of its participants. The theatre comprises an area of a certain country or region. Local theatre comprises a geographical

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<sup>13</sup> More on the meaning of a geographical area in: N.W. Wade: *The Army Operations & Doctrine*, 4th Revised Edition, Lakeland 2008, pp. 1-62.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Bratun: *Vojaška geografija 1*, Ljubljana 2005, p. 24.

area of local military activities. Its size depends on the geographical area from which the participants in the military activities originate. A local theatre has all the characteristics of a general theatre, with the exception of area size.

Theatres of operation are composed of battlespaces, which are restricted areas of a military geographical region in which large-scale military activities take place; these can be a decisive factor for conditions in the theatre of operation. Battlespaces comprise individual parts of a country or restricted areas in a geographical region. They are divided into tactical bounded areas of military activities – battlefields.<sup>15</sup>

The geographical area in the region of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive falls into the category of theatres of operation based on the scale of use of forces and space. Together with the area of concentration of forces, the operation stretched over almost the whole territory of Slovenia, to the Piave River in Italy. The area of the main effort of the armed conflicts between 24 and 26 October 1917 falls into the category of local theatre of operation, and the bounded area of the geographical region of the Soča Valley falls into the category of battlespace. Battlefields comprised bounded areas such as the wider area of Bovec, Tolmin and Kolovrat.

## **Terrain analysis<sup>16</sup>**

Terrain and weather are neutral natural factors that influence military operations; generally, they affect all participants in the battlefield equally. Terrain has a direct impact on the choice of facilities and targets of attack, movement and control of forces. Efficient use of a geographical area can reduce the effectiveness of the enemy.

Battlefield analysis is universal, and is useful for conducting any military activity. It is divided into military space effects and the estimate of those effects

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-24.

<sup>16</sup> In field analysis, we use the topographic map of the RS 1:25,000, sheet 064 Breginj, sheet 065 Bovec, sheet 066 Soča, sheet 088 Kobarid, sheet 089 Tolmin, sheet 090 Kneža, Surveying and Mapping Authority of the RS, Ljubljana 1997.

on the implementation of military activities. In this chapter, we explain the military space effects in the Upper Soča Region where combat activities in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive took place. In the battlefield analysis, we will use military methodology, generally established and composed of subgroups: observation and firing operations area (O), cover and concealment (K), obstacles (O), key terrain (K), and avenues of approach (A). OKOKA is a method which is used to analyze the effects of terrain on combat operations.<sup>17</sup> We always analyze and evaluate all five effects of space in connection to weather, affecting mostly visibility and manoeuvrability.

The area between Rombon and Tolmin comprises all the levels of mountainous terrain: easy, difficult and very difficult manoeuvrability. The lowest point with regard to the altitude of this area is at the confluence of the Tolminka River and the Soča River (153m), and the highest is the summit of the mountain of Krn (2244m). This means 2091m of relative difference in altitude, which is very significant for the area of the Julian Alps. In the breakdown of vertical relief, the Soča battlespace comprises all morphological classes: flatlands (up to 300m of altitude); hills (300-500m); low mountains (500-1000m), medium mountains (1000-2000m), high mountains (above 2000m).<sup>18</sup> This is a typical mountain world, both in terms of topography and in the impact of weather. Topography-wise, the terrain is very varied, with slopes of various steepness, deep, narrow valleys, ravines and gorges. In the high mountains, there are steep, impassable rock walls with serrated Ridges and notches.

On the left bank of the Soča River are the Ridge of Veliki Stador (1899m), Rdeči rob, and the mountain of Krn (2058m). The mountain of Vršič (1897m) stretches into the high mountains; the Ridges of Kolovrat and Matajur (1641m) on the right bank are part of the medium mountains.

The valley between Tolmin (201m) and Kobarid (237m) is part of the valley floor altitude range with regard to the vertical relief breakdown. The geographical area of the Upper Soča Region affected the military effects and units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army: narrow areas were relatively easy to control and to

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<sup>17</sup> Bratun: *Vojaška geografija 1*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

defend; the possibility of blocking them was significant; the attacker did not have the opportunity to develop their forces into a wide battle formation; the balance of power was in favour of the defender; alternative routes were more challenging terrain-wise, longer and more tiresome. Control over communication lines was of the greatest importance due to the possibility of fast and easier movement of forces and important Ridges and mountain tops for the effective control of the entire area.

## Observation and areas of fire operations

Observation includes the ability to detect threat either visually or using technical means. Factors which restrict observation are cover and concealment. An area of fire operations is one which can be effectively covered from the assigned positions with the available weapons and weapon systems. Terrain which enables effective observation and an effective fire system is more easily defensible and gives a tactical advantage to the defensive operations. The assessments of observation and the area of fire operations enable the definition of possible areas of fire operations, defensible terrain and critical points from the point of view of the enemy's observation and fire operations.<sup>19</sup>

Possible areas of combat in the Rombon-Tolmin area:

Area	Advantages	Disadvantages
The mountain of Čukla (1755m)	The starting point for the attack on the Prevala Pass, and later the opening of the Sella Nevea Pass permits partial protection of the right flank of attack in the Bovec-Žaga direction.	Obstacles due to the snow, low manoeuvrability and bare land drastically slow down the speed of movement.

<sup>19</sup> US Army Headquarters: *FM 34-130, Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, Washington 1994, pp. 2-11.

Area	Advantages	Disadvantages
Bovec (480m)- Žaga (353m)	Manoeuvrability in the landscape allows for a fast penetration into the depth with possible continuation towards Učja, Stol or Kobarid.	Because of the mountains surrounding the Bovec Basin, there is a high risk of a flank counterattack due to the bare land.
Žaga (353m)	Tactical advantage in defensive operations due to the narrow passage and the two watercourses of the Soča and Boka Rivers. Exit possibilities are in three directions: Bovec, Kobarid and Učja.	The attacker cannot develop their forces for the attack; great danger of attacks from higher-lying areas from both flanks and from Kobariški Stol.
The mountain of Stol (1673m)	A significant mountain making a natural blockage, terrain-wise presiding over three road links: Bovec-Učja and Bovec-Kobarid on the northern side, and Kobarid-Robič on the southern side.	A serious obstacle to offensive operations with a 1300 m difference in altitude.
Veliki Polovnik (1471m)- Veliki vrh (1764m)- Krasji vrh (1768m)	An easily defensible terrain due to a significant elevation difference and steep, in some places impassable, rocky walls. The predominant Ridge closes the Bovec Basin on the south side and channels the corridor of passage into the Žaga Defile. The Ridge also allows for good tactical control over the Soča Valley on the south side of the mountain of Polovnik in the direction of Žaga-Kobarid.	Difficult steep mountain terrain with impassable areas and a significant elevation difference (1000m of elevation difference between the Slatenik Creek and the Ridge).
The mountain of Vršič (1897m)	The starting point for attack continuation in the direction of Drežnica-Kobarid.	Very difficult, bare, high mountain terrain, icy and snowbound during the offensive, with a narrowly channelized passage onto the Ridge from the north side.



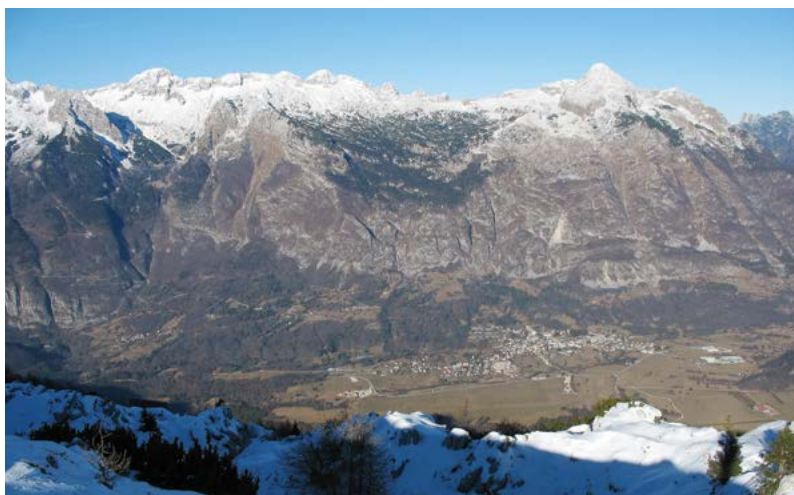
Area	Advantages	Disadvantages
The mountain of Krn (2244m)	The highest and most dominant peak of the whole Krn mountain range offers tremendous opportunities for 360-degree observation. The summit was an important support in defending the mountain of Batognica. With the summit of Krn conquered, the positions of the Krn-Pleče-Kožljak defence line were threatened.	The impassable north and west faces and bare southern mountainside, exposed to observation, from the direction of the mountains of Batognica and Mrzli vrh.
Tolmin (201m)-Kobarid (237m)	The most easily passable terrain in the Tolmin-Kobarid direction due to two road links on either side of the Soča River. Easily defensible terrain due to slopes on both sides and the narrowed area at the village of Selišče.	Limited possibility for manoeuvres due to the Soča River, a significant natural barrier, flowing through the valley. The risk of flank counterattack is high during an attack.
Kobarid (237m)	Important traffic hub in the direction of Bovec, Tolmin and Cividale del Friuli permits rapid movements and unit support. Another connection between Kobarid and Cividale del Friuli was a narrow-gauge railway.	Valley location and relatively easy blocking of accessible routes.
Mountain pasture of Sleme (1482m)-the mountain of Mrzli vrh (1360m)	Tactically, the best starting point for an attack in the direction of Krn village-Vrsno-Kobarid, Selišče and Dolje.	Difficult approach owing to high elevation differences and terrain, difficult to pass in some places, especially on the southern mountainside of Mrzli vrh.

Area	Advantages	Disadvantages
Kolovrat Ridge-Matajur (1641m)	The Ridge tactically controls the Soča Valley between Tolmin and Kobarid and travel corridors from Bovec and Tolmin directions towards Cividale del Friuli. With suitable, correctly deployed forces, the Ridge is easily defensible and therefore gives preference to defensive operations.	Offensive operations are very demanding due to high altitude difference (up to 1000metres). Isolated peaks are a disadvantage to defence due to blind spots.
Očna (906m)-Deveti konfin (930m)-Ježa (949m)	The Ridge tactically controls the Tolmin area to the east and south and gives advantage to defence operations.	Strongly fortified defence positions. The uphill attack (400m).

The areas enabling an effective defence and therefore called defensible terrain are described below. In the mountain world, defensible terrain is found next to natural barriers, depending on the ease of passage of the narrowed areas (cols, passes, narrow valleys, ravines) and important communications and traffic hubs. Natural barriers are the greatest aid to a solid defence – of course only when the area is defended and an organized and effective fire system is in place. Within the region of the penetration of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in October 1917 were areas of the greatest significance for an effective Italian defence: the saddles between Rombon and Čukla, Pri Banderi (2051m)-Vratni vrh (1983m), the Prevala Pass (2077m), the Žaga Defile, the Polovnik Ridge, the Krn Group Ridge, the Kobariški Stol Ridge and the Kolovrat-Matajur Ridge.

### 1. *Saddle between Rombon and Čukla*

In terms of the terrain in this area, the saddle between Rombon and Čukla allows for the easiest passage from Krljišče due west to the Prevala Pass or towards the south-west to the mountain pasture at Planina Goričica and further to the village of Plužna. In this area, the terrain configuration allows the setting up of L-shaped defence positions at different altitudes on natural terraces, sloping from Čukla towards Rombon. This placement permits effective crossfire and flank protection of access to the saddle. The surface is rocky, mostly bare, partly covered in dwarf pines.



*View from Polovnik Ridge towards Bovec. In the background on the right: Rombon (Photo: M. Kuhar)*

### *2. Pri Banderi (2051m)-Vratni vrh (1983m)*

The Ridge of Hill 2152-Pri Banderi-the mountain of Vratni vrh blocks the passage from the Čukla direction towards the Prevala Pass. It is possible to defend the whole area of Goričica from the Ridge. The Ridge is more easily accessible from the eastern side. Towards the west, vertical faces (with more than a 60-degree gradient) slope down to Krnica. The surface is mostly bare with the exception of the Goričica area, partly covered in dwarf pines significantly reducing manoeuvrability in non-snowy conditions.

### *3. The Prevala Pass (2067m)*

The Prevala Pass is the easiest natural passage in this area, enabling a connection between the Bovec Basin and Sella Nevea. The saddle can be efficiently defended with smaller forces with positioning of defence positions to the left and to the right of the saddle; it is difficult to access them due to the steep walls. With use of effective flank fire, it is possible to defend the saddle from the Škrbina Ridge above Prestreljnik (2281m)-Veliki Stador (2150m).

### *4. The Žaga Defile*

The Soča River flows through a narrow passage at Žaga (334m). This is also the location of two main road links: Bovec-Kobarid and Bovec-Učja. The passage is closed off by steep slopes and walls.

Steep precipitous walls fall from the mountain of Kopa (1433m) over the Boka Waterfall to the valley on the right bank of the Soča River. On the left bank, the terrain falls steeply from the mountain of Veliki Polovnik (1471m) to the banks of the Soča River. Opportunities for alternative routes in this part are restricted to the slopes of Polovnik.

Additional obstacles are the Boka Creek in the north-western part of the passage and the Učja Creek in the south-western part. The terrace on the right bank of the Soča River at Na Logu blocks access and allows for the effective defence of the access to the gorge. In the southern part, the terrain allows for the circular defence of the entire area in the Log Čezsoški-Spodnja Žaga-Gornja Žaga triangle from the higher lying areas.

### 5. *The Polovnik Ridge*

The Polovnik Ridge is an 11-kilometre long natural barrier running roughly in the east-west direction, blocking the exit from the Bovec Basin on the right bank of the Soča River due south. Defence positions can be set up right under the Ridge. Individual peaks and convex terraces enable crossfire, mutual position defence, and establishing stronger defence hubs. Two defence hubs of greater importance in this area were:

- In the caves together with the peaks of Pirhovec (1663m) and Veliki vrh (1764m) due to an exposed command post where the Italians directed artillery fire on the greater Bovec Basin and Javoršček (1557m) area;
- Krasji vrh (1768m)-Debeljak (1627m), together with the Vršič Pass (1699m) positions closes off the passage from the mountain pasture of Predolina through Zaprikraj to Drežnica.

Due to the steep terrain and vegetation-covered northern slopes, there are many blind spots, in some places enabling covert access to the Ridge and thus also short distance combat. Access to the Ridge is due to the steep terrain limited to individual trails and footpaths only. Due to the vastness of the area, the only option to successfully defend the Ridge is to use sufficient numbers of personnel and a well-organized fire system.



*Looking west from the summit of Krn. The Kanin mountain range is in the background, and the Polovnik Ridge at the front left (Photo: M. Kuhar)*

#### *6. Kal Ridge-Vršič-Krn-Batognica-Rdeči rob*

With a length of eight kilometres, this Ridge is on average the highest-lying part of the entire area. Its main characteristic is a narrow, rocky and grassy Ridge, with difficult access but offering a good overview of the wider area and its effective defence. The area of difficult access is the reason why the attacking forces can only be developed on narrower passages, facilitating defence from the individual main defence hubs (machine guns, mortars). Access to the Ridge from the south and south-west sides is limited to footpaths and poses great difficulties in snow and ice. Without technical equipment (crampons, ice axe), access is very risky or even impossible.

#### *7. The Kobariški Stol Ridge (1673m)*

The Stol Ridge is a natural barrier more than 16 kilometres long (in the territory of Slovenia), blocking access from the Bovec Basin to the south in an east-west direction. The entire Ridge offers opportunities for setting up defence positions. From individual peaks and forward-set terraces, crossfire and mutual support of defence hubs are possible. The Ridge and the majority of the southern slopes are bare, while the northern slopes are covered in vegetation. The northern slopes have several blind spots and possibilities for

covert access to defence positions. The vast area can be effectively defended only with sufficient numbers of personnel.

### 8. *The Kolovrat-Matajur Ridge*

The Kolovrat-Matajur Ridge, with a length of 17 kilometres, stretches roughly in an east-west direction and represents the last significant natural barrier ahead of the access to the Friuli area from the north towards Cividale del Friuli. The whole Ridge is suitable for setting up defence positions, hindering advances from the north and east from the Tolmin Bridgehead area. In conditions of good visibility, the Ridge enables effective control and defence of communication in the Tolmin-Kobarid direction. The area offers opportunities for five possible defence hubs of great significance: the Očna-Ježa Ridge, Na gradu, the Golobi-Livek Pass, Robič and Kobarid.

#### *A. Očna Ridge (906m)-Ježa (930m)*

This sharp, three-kilometre-long Ridge allows defence from the direction of the Tolmin Bridgehead and prevents passage into the Iudrio Valley and in the direction of the Kolovrat Ridge. Together with the Osojnica positions, it also enables mutual fire support and crossfire. The land is covered in vegetation and blind spots can exist, mostly in the eastern part, which are not reachable from the defence positions.

#### *B. Na gradu (1114m)*

At Na gradu, two major Ridges come together: the Hlevnik Ridge, connecting from the northern side, and the Osojnica Ridge, connecting from the eastern side. From Hill 1114, the Ridge continues due west into the Kolovrat Ridge. The location allows for effective circular defence and controls mostly the area towards the Tolmin Bridgehead. At the top, the Ridge widens into plateau-like bare terrain; 100m below the positions, the land is wooded.



*View from the east towards Tolmin and Volče. In the background Hill 1114 on Kolovrat in the middle, the Hlevnik Ridge on the right (Photo: M. Kuhar)*

### *C. Golobi Pass-Livek*

The pass between the villages of Golobi and Livek is restricted by Kuk (1243m) on the eastern side and Mrzli vrh (1358m) on the western side. The *preval* (pass) is of tactical importance for the defence of the Kobarid-Cividale del Friuli road link. Positions on both slopes enable crossfire at several levels. From the Idrsko-Golobi direction, the pass is accessible from the road, leading over steep terrain and broken by deep ravines of difficult passage and vertical rock sections.



*Livek Pass  
(Photo: M. Kuhar)*

### *D. Robič*

The narrow four-kilometre-long valley between the village of Robič and the former border crossing at Robič makes its way beside the Nadiža Creek. The valley, which has extremely steep slopes, is limited to the east by Matajur (1641m) and by Mija (1237m) on the western side. The narrow gorge is an easily defensible territory and allows for defence from both slopes along the whole valley. Due to the steep slope, alternative routes are very difficult and can be controlled from the opposite slope.

### *E. Kobarid*

The defence of Kobarid, together with the raised grounds above Kobarid (Gradič, Lesica (342m), Ladrski vrh (650m)), blocks passage in the directions of Staro selo-Robič and Kobarid-Žaga. It simultaneously controls an important traffic hub in the area.

## **Cover and concealment**

Concealment means protection against being observed. Forests, bushes, tall grass and other types of vegetation are examples of good concealment. Cover means effective protection against the effects of direct and indirect fire; for example, sources of cover can be stone walls, shelters, bunkers and the like. An analysis of concealment and cover facilitates the assessment of possible access routes, terrain defensibility and the possibilities for defence positions.<sup>20</sup>

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, possible areas of assembly and starting positions were related to the main avenues of approach: in the northern part east of Bovec and in the southern part east of Tolmin. The auxiliary direction of attack allowed for unit assembly before the onset in the Kal-Koritnica-Predel direction and in the Lepena area. These areas were safe from observation by Italian observers on Čukla and Polovnik.

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<sup>20</sup> US Army Headquarters: *FM 34-130*, pp. 2-11.



In connection to concealment and cover, the road over the Predel Pass was also critical, since it was within the reach of the Italian artillery. A backup option for movements and transport in this area was the Rabelj mine tunnel, which connects Rabelj and Log pod Mangartom. A narrow-gauge railway ran through the tunnel, but with very limited capacity.

Unit concentration was also very limited for the main direction of the attack in the Tolmin sector; it was channelled and connected to accommodation in smaller hamlets and villages on the wider Most na Soči-Bača pri Modreju-Bača Ravine area. The deployment of assault units on the start line of the attack was even more condensed. From the Ježa, Kolovrat and Mrzli vrh Ridges, the Italians controlled the whole area of the Tolmin Bridgehead up to Bača pri Modreju using observatories and artillery.

Bad weather conditions in the last few days leading up to the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive were thus an effective concealment due to limited visibility; the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units took advantage of it for covert movement to the start line. In the days just before the offensive and on its first day, all the major Italian observatories in the higher-lying areas were mostly covered in fog and clouds.

## Obstacles

In the military sense, an obstacle is every natural relief characteristic or an artificially built structure which stops, hinders or redirects military movements. Based on obstacle analysis, we can assess the possible locations of mobility corridors or approach directions for military movements. During obstacle analysis, we also estimate the effects of these obstacles on unit mobility.<sup>21</sup> Obstacles are divided into terrain, weather and hydrographic obstructions. Below, we will examine all three types of obstacle in the main and auxiliary direction of the Upper Soča Region breakthrough.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-14.

### ***Terrain obstacles***

The Upper Soča Region has both low and high mountains. The area contains several natural obstacles, directing military movements, especially artillery and logistic support which depend on the condition of routes or roads and on whether or not they are paved. The most significant terrain obstructions in this area are mountain Ridges with a high difference in elevation and hard-to-cross terrain with a poorly branched communications network. In most parts, an area with these obstacles can only be crossed by infantry. In the high mountains, some areas additionally require specialist mountaineering equipment. The area can be divided into five larger Ridge systems: Kanin, Krn, Polovnik, Kobariški Stol, and Kolovrat and Matajur.

#### *F. Rombon (2208m)-Visoki Kanin (2587m)-Vrh Planje (1663m)*

This Ridge closes off the area in the western part of the Bovec Basin, above the Soča River in the Bovec-Žaga-Učja direction. From Rombon to Visoki Kanin, the Ridge more or less extends in the east-west direction; at Visoki Kanin, it changes direction due south towards the mountain of Planja. The most important pass in this area is the Prevala Pass (2067m). The Ridge is mostly rocky and passable only for trained mountaineers with climbing experience. In low visibility conditions, the area of Goričica and Kaninski podi is awkward in terms of orientation; it is crossed by chasms and sinkholes – a dangerous obstacle in snow. The highest peak of the Ridge is Visoki Kanin (2587m).

#### *G. Mrzli vrh Ridge (1360m)-Veliki Stador (1899m)-Krn (2244m)-Vršič (1897m)*

The area on the northern side between Kobarid and Tolmin, on the left bank of the Soča Valley, is half-closed in a semicircle by a mountain Ridge which stretches roughly south-east/north-west. The Ridge between east Stador and Vršič is only accessible to infantry in all seasons. Steep grassy vesine or rock walls drop away on the north and south sides of the Ridge, only accessible to experienced mountaineers. The highest peak of the Ridge is Krn (2244m), geographically dominating the wider area in every direction.

The natural corridors are mostly roadless areas: Krnska notch, the mountain pasture at Planina Sleme, Pretovč and Vršič.



*Looking from the Kolovrat Ridge (Hill 1066) into the Soča Valley at Selišča, with Krn in the background (Photo: M. Kuhar)*

#### *H. Krasji vrh Ridge (1768m)-Veliki Polovnik (1471m)*

The Polovnik Ridge runs in an east-west direction and confines the Soča Valley on the left bank between Žaga and Kobarid. In the eastern part, the Ridge is joined perpendicularly by the Krn-Vršič Ridge through the mountain pasture at Planina Zaprikraj. In the western part, it forms a narrow passage at Žaga, together with Kopa. The highest peak is Krasji vrh (1768m). The Ridge is characterized by steep slopes on both the north and the south sides; in some places they are impassable for infantry.

#### *I. The Kobariški Stol Ridge (1673m)*

The Kobariški Stol Ridge extends in an east-west direction, above the road link Kobarid-Žaga-Učja on the south side and closing the Žaga Defile on the north side, where the road retreats towards Kobarid and the Učja Pass. The highest peak of the Ridge is Stol (1673m).

#### *J. The Kolovrat-Matajur Ridge*

The Kolovrat-Matajur Ridge confines the valley on the west bank of the Soča River between Tolmin and Kobarid and onwards towards Robič. It stretches south-east/north-west. To the east, it divides into three parts at Na gradu (1114m). To the north, it slopes down to the lower-lying Hlevnik, to the

Osojnica Ridge in the middle, and towards the Ježa-Očna Ridge in the south. Between Kolovrat and Matajur, the terrain slopes down to the Livek Pass, the location of an important road link from Kobarid to Čedad. Along the whole Ridge the northern slopes are much steeper than the southern ones. The highest peak of the Ridge is Matajur (1641m). Viewed from the Soča Valley, the Kolovrat and Matajur Ridges are the last two large natural barriers between the Soča Valley Region and the Friuli region.



*View from Hill 1114 on Kolovrat, with Matajur in the background (Photo: M. Kuhar)*

### ***Weather barriers***

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the weather conditions played a major role in all six main domains: visibility, winds, precipitation, cloud, temperature and humidity. Between 10 and 25 October 1917, the Bovec and Tolmin areas were affected by bad weather with rain, snow and low temperatures.

Due to the low cloud and precipitation, visibility was very low or non-existent. The fog dissipated only occasionally. Observation from higher-lying observatories was thus mostly hindered or even thwarted altogether. On the first day of the attack, the Italian artillery could not search for targets or aim in the attack directions due to reduced visibility. Aerial observation was also

rendered impossible. On 25 October, the weather took a turn for the better. It was a clear and sunny day, which enabled a good overview of the battlefield. In the morning there were patches of fog in the valleys. In the high mountains, the temperature was below 0°C on 24 October, while it reached freezing point or only a few degrees above it in the lower-lying areas.

On 25 and 26 October, it warmed up slightly during the day, but the clear nights were again very cold. Due to the precipitation, the soldiers' clothes and footwear were soaked. Among the possible consequences were hypothermia and cold-related injuries.

### ***Hydrographic barriers***

The largest hydrographic barrier in the area was and is to this date the Soča River. Following the heavy and long-term autumn precipitation, wading the river was impossible due to the water depth and strong current. In this area, four other major watercourses flow into the Soča River: Koritnica at Kal-Koritnica; Boka at the Žaga Ravine; Učja at Log Čezsoški; Tolminka at Tolmin; and Idrijca at Most na Soči. Some smaller streams also flow into the Soča River, of which the more important ones are Slatenik, Ročica, Kozjak, Idrija, Volarja, Kamnica and Hotevlje. Alpine streams usually have torrential characteristics; during periods of heavy rain, especially in spring and autumn, they rise considerably and are temporarily impassable.

An important role in the crossing of the Soča River was played by bridges, which were very scarce during the offensive. Among the most important were the Napoleon Bridge at Kobarid, which enabled unit provision in the Krn mountain range. In the panic of 24 October, the Italians demolished it, thus making impossible the withdrawal of the Italian units from the Krn mountain range; the other bridge at Idrsko was already occupied by the Stein battle group units. The military bridge under Ključ, east of Bučenica, and the bridge over the Tolminka River at Tolmin were also important for the passage of Alpine Corps units to the start line.

## Key terrain

Key terrain is each location or area which the seizing, containment and control of means a tactical advantage for either side. For this reason, it is often chosen for a combat position or facility. Key terrain normally comprises predominant areas, from which the battlefield can be controlled by fire and observation (higher-lying geographical areas), providing cover and concealment to defence forces. It is accessible for introducing reserves or the movement of units from the hinterland.<sup>22</sup>

Key facility	Why?
Očna (906m)-Deveti konfin (930m)-Ježa (949m)	The attention-grabbing Ridge tactically dominates the land to the east in the Tolmin-Selski vrh (588m) direction and has a well-functioning road link with the Italian hinterland.
Kolovrat-Matajur (1641m)	A natural barrier between the Soča Valley and Čedad, tactically dominating the Tolmin-Kobarid area and road links towards Čedad.
Kobarid (237m)	Traffic hub, connecting Bovec, the entire front from Kobarid and Čedad through Livek and Robič; connection for the entire front line in the area of Krn, Polovnik and Mrzli vrh.
Kobariški Stol	A natural barrier, topographically closing off the Bovec Basin exit towards Čedad.
Mrzli vrh (1360m)	Predominant hill, topographically dominating the Tolmin Basin.
The Tolmin-Kobarid roads on both banks of the Soča River	The main avenue of approach in the Tolmin-Kobarid-Cividale del Friuli direction, splitting in Kobarid into two corridors through Livek and Robič

## Avenues of approach

Avenues of approach are air or ground directions leading the attacking forces towards a facility or key terrain, and are divided into individual corridors.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> US Army Headquarters: *FM 34-130*, pp. 2-17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-18.

Road and rail links were the most important on the Soča battlefield; for infantry units, paths, trails and bridle ways were also important. The principal mobility corridor in the Upper Soča Region is the road link Bovec-Kobarid-Tolmin. Before the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, this corridor was mostly in the hands of the Italians. West of Bovec, the road crossed the front line from the Austrian to the Italian side and back to the Austrian side just before Tolmin. A road link also existed on the right bank of the Soča River. Just before Tolmin, the road crossed the Soča River by a bridge, demolished during the war. Between Kobarid and Tolmin, a parallel road link existed on the left bank of the Soča River.



*View from Kolovrat (Hill 1066) into the Soča Valley in the direction of Kobarid (Photo: M. Kuhar)*

***Road links connected to the main mobility corridor:***

Road	Significance
Kranjska Gora-Vršič-Trenta-Bovec	Approach corridor to the front from the Upper Sava Valley to Trenta
Tarvisio-Predel-Log pod Mangartom-Bovec	Approach corridor to the front from Tarvisio for the Rombon-Bovec sector
Spodnja Žaga-Učja-Tarcento-Cividale del Friuli	Corridor of approach for Italian units in the Bovec Basin and surrounding area

Road	Significance
Kobarid-Robič-Brišča-Cividale del Friuli	Key communication line for Italian units for the wider Kobarid area
Kobarid-Breginj-Plastišča	Auxiliary passage direction from Kobarid towards the west
Tolmin-Volarje-Kamno-Kobarid	Parallel road link
Idrsko-Livek-Cividale del Friuli	The second key road link between the Upper Soča Region and Cividale del Friuli
Tolmin-Nova Gorica	Was not functional due to the proximity of the front line
Tolmin-Most na Soči-Podbrdo-Škofja Loka	Corridor of approach from Kranj to the Tolmin sector
Tolmin-Most na Soči-Idrija-Logatec	Corridor of approach from Ljubljana to the Tolmin sector and to the Trnovo Plateau

In addition to the main road links allowing for the transit of all vehicles, the following road links were constructed: a military road Log Čezsoški-mountain pasture at Planina Jama on Polovnik, Kobarid-Drežnica-Planina Zaprikraj, Ladra-village of Krn- mountain pasture at Planina Kuhinja, a road link through the southern slopes of the Kolovrat and Matajur Ridges, a military road over the Solarji Saddle into the Soča Valley, and a military road Čiginj-Ohaje-Fratnik-Pušno.<sup>24</sup> The fact is that the Italian side had much better road links to its positions than the Austrian side, both between individual defence lines and relating to the link to the rear area. The Austro-Hungarian Empire did not have any road links with units in the Krn mountain range; the Italians, on the other hand, brought them much closer over the more easily passed southern slopes.

The railway was another important traffic link on the Soča battlefield. On the Austro-Hungarian side, the most important railway line was Jesenice-Nova Gorica, which in October 1917 was functional up to Grahovo in the Bača Ravine owing to the proximity of the front line. The second one was a narrow-gauge railway between Logatec and Idrija, and the third a narrow-gauge railway with very limited capacity through the tunnel from Rabelj to

<sup>24</sup> L. Galič, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, Tolmin 2005, p. 180.



Log pod Mangartom. On the Italian side, a narrow-gauge railway was built close to the front line between Kobarid and Cividale del Friuli through the Nadiža Valley.<sup>25</sup>

### *Mountain paths and bridle ways:*<sup>26</sup>

Footpath/bridle way	Significance
Bohinj-Komna-Bogatin Saddle-Šmohor	Main supply route of the Austrian units for the eastern part of the Krn mountain range
Lepena-Lake Krn	Main supply route of the Austrian units for the central part of the Krn mountain range
Lepena-mountain pasture at Planina Zagreben	Main supply route of the Austrian units for the western part of the Krn mountain range
Drežnica-Krn	Supply route of the Italian units on Krn
Drežniške ravne-Srednji vrh mountain pasture at Planina Zappleč-Lopatnik Planina Zaprikraj-Vršič	Supply route of the Italian units for the entire Kal-Krn Ridge
Kal-Koritnica-mountain pasture at Planina Golobar	Supply route of the Austro-Hungarian units for the Javoršček area
Plužna-Planina Goričica Plužna-Krnica	Supply routes of the Italian units for the Goričica-Čukla area

### *Major mountain passes and saddles*

Pass/saddle	Significance of passage/connection
Prevala (2067m)	Bovec Basin-Sella Nevea
Čez Utro (1305m)	Planina Golobar to Slatenik and to Planina Zaprikraj
Saddle between Vrh Ruš (1861 m) and Vršič (1897m)	Lepena-Planina Zaprikraj
Planina Zaprikraj	Slatenik Creek-Drežnica-Kobarid
Krnska notch (2058m)	Lake Krn-village of Krn and the Soča Valley
Planina Sleme (1408m)	Tolmin Gorges-Krn village
Pretovc (1124m)	Tolmin Gorges-Selišče (Krn village)

<sup>25</sup> More on this rail link in: V. Hobič, T. Brate: *Vlakec - Trenino*, Kobarid 2017.

<sup>26</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 180.

Pass/saddle	Significance of passage/connection
V jamah (Polovnik)	Slatenik Creek-Trnovo ob Soči
Mountain pasture at Planina Božica (Stol)	Spodnja Žaga-Sedlo
Livek	Kobarid-Cividale del Friuli
Solarji (Kolovrat)	Tolmin-Cividale del Friuli

## Area of unit assembly and formation

Based on the assessment of the avenues and corridors of approach on the Soča battlefield, two possibilities for forces movement and the concentration of the majority of units and assets immediately become apparent. These are the eastern part of the Bovec Basin and the area east of the Tolmin Bridgehead. The reason for this was the road and rail links, which opened the passage to the first defence line in just these two parts. In all other areas, the units had to surmount significant elevation differences and assets had to be carried or transported by cableways. The approach was especially long in the Krn mountain range and in the Rombon area. Forces concentration before the attack was very difficult due to the limited accommodation conditions. A march with a transition to attack would be questionable in this case due to the overtiredness of the soldiers. Since the high mountains were already covered in snow at this time of the year, an attack on a large scale would be more or less stoppable on the high ground.

## Locations of individual assets and Italian defence systems

The standard system of the Italian defence lines was established, after almost two years, by two directives, of 28 January and 29 April 1917; before this, a directive of February 1915 was in place. The defence lines system envisaged three defence lines. The first or front fortified line was a long, uninterrupted, single line, not set by the defence strategic standards in force in the Italian army. It stretched over the borders and backs of hills and along the valleys,

and represented the longest range of Italian conquests up to October 1917. Technically, it was well-structured. It was composed of numerous underground rooms and tunnels and machine gun nests with dense wire barriers in front of the line. Centres of resistance were missing and the positions could often be seen from afar.

The first line was occupied by infantry; directly behind it were reserves in favourable, hidden positions. Artillery positions were also occupied. Behind the first defence line stretched the main and army lines, which were not occupied by infantry except in sections where they overlapped with the first line. They were intended to be occupied only in the event of a threat or during preparation for significant offensive actions.<sup>27</sup>

The first defence line extended from Čukla through the eastern edge of Bovec and Čezsoča, along the Slatenik Stream, over the Zaprikraj Saddle, Vršič, Vrata, Krn, Batognica and the western borders of Maslenik, Sleme and Mrzli vrh, downhill to the village of Gabrje, across the Soča River, bypassing Sveti Danijel and Volče on the southern side, stretching uphill to Čiginj, then on to Varda, Čempone, Žibli vrh and Grad vrh, and ending at Stol nad Doblarjem. After the last Italian offensive, the Italian first defence line moved to Mali vrh, then over Mešnjak in a south-easterly direction from Tolminski Lom to Hoje and south over the Banjška Plateau.

The second defence line, the main defence line or the line of key defence stretched from Veliki Škedenj (under the mountain of Kanin) downhill towards Gozdec and Kopa and on to Žaga, and uphill onto the Polovnik Ridge to Vršič where it coincided with the first line to Krn. From Krn, it dropped through Kožljak and Pleče to the Soča River at Selišče, ascended the right bank of the Soča River to Hlevnik, then over the Veliki Špik Ridge to Ježa, and merged again with the first line at Čemponi. The choice of its trajectory was even worse than the trajectory of the first line, even though the terrain offered natural advantages for fortification. This line was also uninterrupted and single with a few transverse connections (supply routes) with other lines.

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<sup>27</sup> L'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito : *L'Esercito Italiano nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918)*, Vol. 4, *Le Operazioni del 1917, Tomo 3, Gli avvenimenti dall'Ottobre al Dicembre*, Roma 1967, p. 172; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 180.

It was technically well-constructed, but not entirely finished. Wire barriers were set along the entire line.

The third defence line or the Army defence line went downhill from Stol to the Soča River and then north-east in the form of a Bridgehead, passing by Kobarid on the left bank of the Soča River, crossing the Soča River again at Idrsko, and climbing to the Kolovrat and Ježa Ridges over Livek and Kuk. From Ježa, it descended to Ostri Kras, then on Globočak and over Lig to Korada. This line was designed and built at the beginning of the war and was outdated in terms of its fortifications. It was a single one, but located over naturally strong positions. In accordance with Cadorna's order of 18 September, it needed to be updated; double wire barriers were being put in place, but the work was not fully completed. In the Tolmin Bridgehead area, the line followed the 500m contour line, and the "observation line" stretched from Gabrje to Čiginj in the valley. There were some well-fortified positions on this line at Foni, Livek, Kambreško and Ježa. To the north-east of Kobarid, one line split from the Army line and extended to the west of Staro selo over the borders of Matajur to Sveti Martin and Kum and to Globočak from the western side. From Kum, a new line was formed along the watershed between the Nadiža and Idrija Rivers due south and over Kuk to Livek. A three-line system had also begun to form on the Banjška Plateau, but the lines were not entirely developed.<sup>28</sup>

On Ježa and Na gradu, the artillery positions completely controlled the Tolmin Bridgehead with regard to fire. Taking weather conditions into account, the directions of attack in the high mountains were very questionable due to fresh snow. These were first and foremost the area between Rombon and Čukla, and the entire Ridge from Vršič to Krn and Rdeči rob. Areas in which forces were most susceptible to observation and fire were all higher-lying bare areas in the high mountains and the southern and south-western mountainsides between Rombon, Čukla and Prevala, the Vršič, Krn and Rdeči rob Ridges, the area between Bovec and Žaga, and the area between Tolmin, Kobarid and Staro selo.

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<sup>28</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, p. 173-174; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 180-181.

## FROM DEFENSIVE TO OFFENSIVE ACTION

In the autumn of 1917, the Central Powers were in a favourable position – after the fiasco of the Russian Army on the Eastern Front it became clear that Russia no longer had an important role in the war. The French Army failed on the Western Front; the Triple Entente forces in the southern Balkans were not yet ready for a larger offensive. Up to then, the Italians had organized 11 offensives on the Soča battlefield, of which the 6<sup>th</sup> is worth mentioning, since they conquered Gorizia and demolished the Austro-Hungarian Gorizia Bridgehead. The 11<sup>th</sup> offensive also brought significant acquisitions, since the Italians conquered a large part of Banjšice. The Triple Entente forces demanded that Italy upheld the initiative on the South-Western Front because the French and British units on the Western Front were not capable of executing larger military actions until the end of 1917. Italy remained cautious despite the pressure of the Allies to continue with the attacks on the Italian Front. Just after the 11<sup>th</sup> offensive the Head of the Italian Supreme Command, General Luigi Cadorna, considered a renewed offensive on the Soča River before the end of 1917, but soon changed his mind due to the great losses on the Italian side and the low morale of the soldiers.

After the 11<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the Austro-Hungarian Army found itself in a critical situation; the terrain conditions indicated that it would be difficult for the Austro-Hungarian defence to fend off yet another Italian offensive until the late autumn of 1917 or the spring of 1918. In May 1917, the former 5<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Army was also renamed the Command of the Soča Front (*Kommando der Isonzoarmee*); the next restructuring took place on 23 August, when the former unified Army was divided into the 1<sup>st</sup> Soča Army under General Wenzel von Wurm, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army under General Johann von Henriquez. Both Armies were subordinate to the Command of the Soča

Armies, at the time renamed HGK (*Heeresgruppenkomando*) Boroević. Despite the disintegration of the Russian Army, the Austro-Hungarian Empire did not succeed in deploying all the units from the Eastern battlefield to the South-Western or Italian Front due to numerous logistical problems. In Romania, the German Army suggested the destruction of Moldova, where the remaining representatives of the Romanian government had retreated to accelerate the fall of Russia. Thus the Austro-Hungarian Empire was deciding between two options after the 11<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive – counter-attack or withdrawal, which would include retreat from Trieste and Istria.

Emperor Karl I wanted to achieve peace, and at first doubted the cooperation with the Germans, because the joint action would reduce the chances of a ceasefire. Finally, the Austro-Hungarian Empire decided to carry out an offensive on the Soča battlespace. Independent action by the Austro-Hungarian units against the Italians proved to be unrealistic, so Emperor Karl I explained the critical situation on the Italian Front to the German Emperor Wilhelm II. He asked him for the Austro-Hungarian units (up to ten divisions) on the Russian Front to be replaced by the German units, and to hand over to them a section of heavy artillery with its crews. Emperor Karl I justified this by the unfavourable morale effect which the German units and command would have on the *esprit de corps* of the Austro-Hungarian units, even though it was obviously a question of prestige. The German Emperor sent the request of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor to the Deputy Commander of the German Supreme Command, General Erich Ludendorff, who estimated that he could get six to eight divisions which could come to the rescue of the Austro-Hungarian Army before winter. At first, Ludendorff was not thrilled at the Austro-Hungarian suggestion of the Soča Offensive, because he was advocating an offensive in Galicia. He felt that the German units were lacking experience in mountain warfare and that the offensive objective was too narrow. On 29 August, General Alfred von Waldstätten also arrived at the German Supreme Command with a proposal for a joint counteroffensive against Italy. The lending of the Austro-Hungarian unit was limited in time by the Germans, and although they extended it until the end of the year, the uncertainty had an impact on strategic planning. The German Army did not deal with strategic questions and the vision of the Italian Front; this was the

domain of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was evident as early as the end of 1917, when German units left the Italian Front.<sup>29</sup>

The German General Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, a successful Bavarian artillery officer and the Chief of Staff of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, considered that the Soča Offensive could succeed because of the small depth of the Italian defence where all three defence lines were very close together. In his opinion, the Austro-Hungarian Army had vast experience in mountain warfare. He believed in the offensive capabilities of the German Army, the experience and competence of the German officers, and the poorly organized Italian defence in this section of the front.<sup>30</sup>

Soon the Germans had obtained a realistic picture of the South-Western Front and the Soča battlefield. Building on tactical assumptions, prepared by the newly restructured Austro-Hungarian Command of the South-Western Front in Maribor, in which no more than six weeks were planned for forces unification, the German Army suggested a faster way; namely the relocation of seven elite divisions from the South-Eastern and Western Fronts to the Soča Front, and of some other forces from the Supreme Command reserve. Thus, the agreement on military assistance was signed on 8 September and the offensive plan was named “Loyalty in arms” (*Waffentreue*). After the Austro-Hungarian intelligence service had decoded Italian coded messages in 1917, the Austro-Hungarian Army received accurate information on the number and force of the Italian units defending the territory between Tolmin and Bovec. Although General Ludendorff was not impressed by the proposal of a new offensive, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the Head of Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces, had the last word. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army was established, subordinate to the command of the South-Western Front, with seven German and eight Austro-Hungarian divisions. General Otto von Below was appointed Army Commander, and General von Dellmensingen,

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<sup>29</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, Barnsley 2001, p. 9, 11; M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, Bologna 2008, p. 367; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> K. von Dellmensingen: *Lo sfondamento dell’Isonzo*, Milano 1981, p. 55; G. Antoličič: *Maribor in poveljstvo jugozahodne fronte med prvo svetovno vojno*, doctoral thesis, Maribor 2018, pp. 237-247.

who was sent to carry out terrain reconnaissance in advance by General von Below, Chief of Staff. Dellmensingen was Bavarian officer with vast experience in mountain warfare; after being promoted to General, he was also appointed Commander of the German Alpine Corps. Until then, the Germans had not had any mountain units comparable to those known to the Italian and Austro-Hungarian Armies.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to note that the author of one of the first plans for an offensive on the South-Western Front was Austro-Hungarian Field Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. His plan was already formulated at the end of 1916, and at the beginning of 1917 von Hötzendorf established contacts with the German Supreme Headquarters to ensure German help. Emperor Karl I was also informed of the plan, which did not come to fruition due to the reorganization of the Austro-Hungarian Army and the allied offensive on the Western Front in the spring of 1917. The plan envisaged an energetic breakthrough from South Tyrol and the encirclement of the majority of the Italian units in the Veneto plain after the Tolmin breakthrough and the engagement of the greatest number of Italian reserves. The second, and at the same time key, part of the plan was later omitted, which could have changed the course of action on the entire front between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy. So, the author of the plan was von Hötzendorf, but it was carried out by von Below, who is still considered one of the greatest German Army leaders. It is important to stress that even before World War I there were Austro-Hungarian plans for a breakthrough of the Italian border, and that during the war there were several other plans for a breakthrough of the Italian Front in addition to Hötzendorf's.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 12; Isnenghi, Rochat: *La Grande Guerra*, p. 368; M. Thompson: *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919*, London 2008, p. 296.

<sup>32</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 8; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 252.



# GERMAN AND AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN PREPARATIONS FOR THE 12<sup>TH</sup> OFFENSIVE

## Development of concept and plan of attack

When German General Ludendorff promised help to the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 29 August 1917, the processes of decision-making and offensive planning were also launched very quickly.

On 15 September, the commander of the South-Western Front, Archduke Eugen, analyzed the offensive plan together with Generals von Below and von Dellmensingen, so that the first orders had already been given to the operation participants on 18 September. There was only a month left until the launch of the offensive. In a short period of time, the participating units carried out all the preparations, formed detailed plans and orders, and conducted movements of units and materiel to the areas of responsibility.

Important events during the planning, organization and preparations for the operation "Loyalty in Arms" (*Zvestoba v orožju*) in 1917 included:

Date	Activity
29 August	When visiting the assistant of the commander of the Austro-Hungarian Head of Supreme Command, General Waldstaetten, in Berlin, German General Erich Ludendorff promised seven German divisions as help to the Austro-Hungarian Empire's offensive operation in the Italian theatre of operation. <sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> M. Simčič: *888 dni na soški fronti*, Ljubljana 2006, p. 199.

2-6 September	German General Krafft von Dellmensingen visited the Soča battlespace with the aim of assessing the possibility of a breakthrough in this part of the battlefield. <sup>34</sup>
8 September	Plans for the operation <i>Zvestoba v orožju</i> <sup>35</sup> were completed and confirmed.
11 September	German General Otto von Below took over the command of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Army. <sup>36</sup>
13 September	The German Alpine Corps moved to the Tyrol as part of the deception manœuvre. <sup>37</sup>
15 September	Archduke Eugen, General Otto von Below and General Krafft von Dellmensingen were introduced to the offensive plan, and analyzed it.
17 September	General Otto von Below arrived at the Command of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Army in Kranj.
18 September	Archduke Eugen gave the order to attack to all participating forces. <sup>38</sup>
22 September	The commander of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Army conducted reconnaissance of the Tolmin Bridgehead from Hill 1007 under the mountain of Kobilja glava.
24 September	The commander of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Army conducted reconnaissance of the Tolmin Bridgehead from the mountain of Kobilja glava.
4 October	The commander of the German Alpine Corps, General Ludwig von Tutschek, gave the order to attack to the commanders of the subordinate regiments at Bled (Mlino).
5-6 October	The commander of the Leib Regiment conducted reconnaissance at the Tolmin Bridgehead.
8 October	Battalion commanders of the Leib Regiment conducted reconnaissance in the Tolmin area (preparatory areas and starting areas for attack).
15 October	Commencement of movements of the German Alpine Corps troops from the Gorenjska region to the Soča Valley.

<sup>34</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> M. Simčič: *888 dni na soški fronti*, p. 199.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>37</sup> V. Klavora: *Koraki skozi meglo*, Celovec 2004, p. 259.

<sup>38</sup> V. Klavora: *Koraki skozi meglo*, p. 261.

The Germans did not leave the planning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive to chance. They wanted to make sure that the Tolmin breakthrough was possible in the planned offensive sectors. General von Dellmensingen, one of the most experienced specialists in mountain warfare, had already left to conduct reconnaissance of the Tolmin Sector on 2 September 1917; soon after, he was appointed Chief of Staff of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. After a four-day reconnaissance activity, General Dellmensingen wrote in his assessment, that the attack: “/.../ in terms of the existing problems is at the extreme limit of what is possible and will constantly be a risky endeavour”. Despite his assessment “at the limit of possible” he believed that the offensive operation could be conducted.

He based his assessment on three elements which would guarantee the success of the offensive:

- The offensive capability of the German Army;
- The experience and competence of the German officers;
- In his opinion the Italian defence was not as well-organized as the French or British on the Western Front.<sup>39</sup>

At the time the offensive capability of the German Army was derived from the new tactic of the operation of assault units, with predominant elements of deep penetration tactics in breakthrough and infiltration together with strong and coordinated indirect and direct fire support. The effectiveness of the German officers was based mostly on the partially decentralized operation and on the concept of mission-based command (*auftragstaktik*).

General von Dellmensingen estimated that the most likely defence of the Italian defence forces would be based on a static linear battle formation. On the Western Front at the time, the defence system on both sides was established in a significantly more flexible way and in more depth.

The most emphasized parts of General von Dellmensingen's<sup>40</sup> report after conducted reconnaissance were:

- The Tolmin Basin with its Bridgehead offers a useful starting point for an offensive action;

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<sup>39</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> L. Galič, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 293.

- The possibility of a sudden attack must be completely excluded;
- In reality, the dangerous phase of the attack would start only when the units reached high positions (Kolovrat) and found themselves out of reach of their artillery;
- Overcoming elevation differences would be highly physically demanding, which would require the selection of well-prepared and trained infantry units;
- Concentration of forces would be a major challenge, unsolvable according to traditional logistic principles. From the areas of Celovec (Klagenfurt), Bled and Ljubljana, movement to Tolmin was possible by only three roads – from Škofja Loka over Petrovo Brdo and Podbrdo or over Kladje and Cerkno, and from Logatec over Idrija.

Based only on this assessment, on 8 September 1917 the Germans and the Austro-Hungarian Empire confirmed the plan for the offensive, which would be carried out in the mountain area between Bovec and Tolmin. Reports and orders show that from the approval of the plan of attack on 8 September to the start of the attack on 24 October 1917, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units had exactly 45 days to organize, prepare, move, equip and additionally train the units. Taken together, this time window was short, so all processes needed to run in parallel.

## **Analysis of the operational-tactical design**

The planning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is a classic example of an operative formation or concept development and planning. In this chapter, the formation of the concept and plan of attack will be explained, based on the methodology of operational planning and using the German Alpine Corps, operating in the centre of the attack, as an example. In the simulation of the operational-tactical process of concept and planning development, the topic will be explained by individual segments. Targets, centres of gravity and decisive directions and points of the attack, as followed by the German Alpine Corps units, will be defined. Each individual segment will also be conceptually defined.

The objective can be understood as the purpose of the action, conducted in a specific space and time frame. By its nature, location, intention and potential use, the military targets efficiently contribute to the execution of a military action. We distinguish between offensive and defensive objectives and a combination of the two.<sup>41</sup> A military target can be exclusively or predominantly physical or tangible. This is typical of high-intensity conflicts at the levels of the tactical and operational objectives. A military target can also be exclusively intangible. For example, undermining the enemy's morale and will to fight is basically an intangible military objective. However, a military objective is mostly comprised of both tangible and intangible objectives.<sup>42</sup>

In a military conflict, it is not necessary to defeat the enemy with physical destruction. We can carry out only those emergency measures which suffice for its neutralization. The fastest way to achieve this is to direct the main effort into the lowering of its will to fight which is defined as the main intangible attack objective.

In planning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the tangible geographical objective of the attack was at the forefront from the start. At the very beginning, General von Dellmensingen prepared a plan with the aim of pushing the Italian forces approximately 40 km away from the Soča River towards the Tagliamento River (*Slo. Tilmington*), and thus maybe also achieve an indirect impact in the Lower Soča Region. What is interesting is that not even the General, and later on Field Marshal Svetozar Boroević von Bojna, believed in the success of the offensive which would move the front line to the Tagliamento River. The Germans estimated that the offensive would be a success if the Italians were incapable of executing offensive action until the spring of 1918. They also decided that Krauss' 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps would be part of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, so that the military operations to the Tagliamento River would be more easily coordinated. The Austro-Hungarian plan for a breakthrough was based on the fact that any further attrition of the Austro-Hungarian Army in the Kras area, and any breakthrough in this part of the battlefield would be impossible, so the deciding breakthrough must start at the Tolmin Bridgehead. At the

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<sup>41</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, Rhode Island 2006, p. II-3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. II-3.

initiative of General Krauss and with the consent of the Chief of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, General von Dellmensingen, the breakthrough at Bovec was also included in the plans; it was meant to cut off the Italian troops at Polovnik and the Krn mountain range and to tighten the pincers at Kobarid from the north.<sup>43</sup>

Field Marshal Moltke Senior wrote that victory in a great battle (Schlacht) is the big moment of the war. Only victory breaks the enemy's will to fight and forces them to submit to our wishes. This is not an occupation of a certain part of the territory, or a conquest of a fortified post, because the destruction of the enemy's military force usually decides the result of the war. War objectives are not achieved by passive waiting. For Moltke, the first key questions were: where is the enemy, what are their intentions, and where will they focus their main effort (Schwerpunkt). The operative objective is to break the enemy's will to fight.<sup>44</sup>

We therefore distinguish between objectives on the operational level and those on the tactical level. At the operational level, we mostly talk about intangible objectives, such as breaking the enemy's cohesion and will to fight, so this is not a case of the total physical destruction of the enemy, but rather their neutralization.

At a tactical level, the objectives are much more tangible and are directly related to the enemy's combat capabilities and the formation of their forces. In addition, the objectives are also the individual geographical areas enabling a tactical advantage both to the defence forces and to the attacking forces. In the order of the German Alpine Corps of 11 October 1917, the first point lists the key and individual attack objectives which were geographical points. The Army's objective for the attack was the occupation of the Humin (Gemona)-Cividale del Friuli line.

The first attack objective was the occupation of the line Kanin-Breški Jalovec (Punta di Monte Maggiore)-Mija (Monte Mia)-Matajur-San Martino-Gornji Trbil (Tribil Superiore). The occupation of Matajur was defined as the key geographical objective of the Stein group.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 296.

<sup>44</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. II-30.

One of the most important steps in developing operational formation is defining the centres of gravity. Centres of gravity are characteristics, capabilities or locations (areas) from which countries, alliances, military forces or other groups receive freedom of action, physical strength, or will to wage war (fighting spirit). This is the main source for reaching a particular goal.<sup>46</sup> In addition to defining the centres of gravity of one's own forces, it is imperative to also define the enemy's centres of gravity, which are critical to the successful performance of an operation. Attacking a centre of gravity is a fatal war strategy, because its demise means the disintegration of the whole structure. To hit a centre of gravity means to destabilize the enemy. Conventional generals mostly pay attention to the physical component of combat power, whereas a top-notch strategist always thinks about what is in the background, what is the element that supports the whole system, and what is the basis of this system.<sup>47</sup>

With regard to the question of the basis of the Italian army's combat power, mostly the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, the answer focuses on two important domains.

Their fire support, mostly of course the artillery, stood out in the tactical part; on the operational-tactical level, the same goes for their command and control system. In the area between Bovec and Tolmin, Italian artillery forces were deployed for offensive operations and could already pose a serious threat to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's attack at the start line and in the first phase of the attack. Their centralized system of command and control was a critical point on the Italian side, because it did not allow timely responses to rapid changes on the battlefield. Based on this, the logical conclusion is that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army attack was focused on the Italian artillery and its system of command and control, and also on the fighting spirit of the Italian Army or its will to fight on the operational level. So the attackers focused all their fighting power into these three focus points.

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<sup>45</sup> Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA Karlsruhe), 456 F 33 Nr. 30 = JägerBrig Nr. 2, KTB 1917, Abschrift, Kommando des Alpen-Korps, 11 October 1917, Anweisung für den Angriff des Alpenkorps, pp. 1-3.

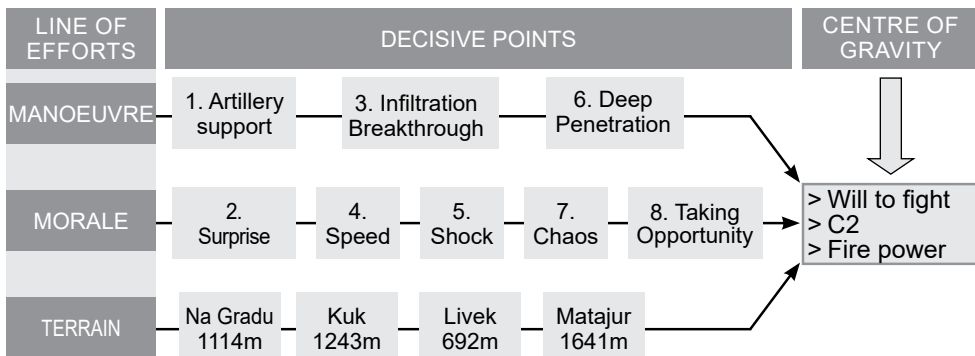
<sup>46</sup> A. Pelaj: *Načrtovanje bojnih delovanj*, Ljubljana 2008, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 208.

In the German Army, the focus points were the doctrine of non-linear operations and the command and control concept *auftragstaktik*. The Italian Army was left almost empty-handed when it comes to an efficient answer to these two centres of gravity, let alone the idea or a plan for an attack or counterattack. At the time, the Italians were not familiar with movable offensive defence in depth, which was already being exercised on the western battlefields by the Germans and the French. That would have been an effective attack on the first centre of gravity. But with their centralized approach to command, without a clearly expressed intention at all levels, they were not capable of attacking the second centre of gravity – mission-based command and the clearly expressed intention of commanders at all levels.

Centres of gravity are reached through critical paths over decisive points. A decisive point can be an area, a precise moment, or a special characteristic or quality, enabling the maintenance of freedom and strength in the centre of gravity. For commanders, the ability to create favourable conditions at decisive points enables the maintenance of freedom of action and taking the initiative.<sup>48</sup>

From the plans of attack and their later execution, we can deduce that the attacking forces advanced towards the centres of gravity through three critical paths: by a manoeuvre, by influencing the enemy's morale, and over decisive points in the geographical area. Each of these critical paths had several decisive points.



*Operative formation of the concept of the German Alpine Corps' attack in the direction Tolmin-Kolovrat-Matajur (Source: M. Kuhar)"*

<sup>48</sup> A. Pelaj: *Načrtovanje bojnih delovanj*, p. 25.



The Germans included their experience and the lessons learned in manoeuvre and joint warfare gained in 1916 and 1917 to the plan of operation. The crucial innovation was the mutual support of two important branches, the infantry and artillery, not only during the fire preparation phase, but also during the attack.

The first important decisive point of the critical manoeuvre path was the artillery attack preparation; later, artillery support became important for the infantry during the attack. When it came to the artillery preparation for the attack, the operation's centre of gravity in the plans shifted from quantity to quality. In the past, the artillery preparation of attacks could last several days which did not have the expected effects. From the very start, the planners of the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive gave up on the idea of a multi-day artillery preparation, because the total destruction of the Italian defence system in the mountain area was not even possible. Additionally, it would be easy for the enemy to determine the main effort of the attack by lengthy fire preparation; thus, it would have enough time to relocate the reserves and concentrate its defence and counterattack forces.

According to their effects, there are three types of artillery fire in military theory and practice which cause destruction, neutralization or suppression. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, destruction fire was planned for the destruction of individual targets or the making of passages through the first defence line. Taken as a whole, the planning was mostly dedicated to artillery neutralization fire, whose objectives were the temporary incapacitation of the enemy's operations and reducing their effectiveness. With artillery suppression fire, they temporarily made it impossible for the enemy to carry out its tasks.<sup>49</sup>

In the plans for the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the artillery preparation was reduced considerably, down to two time periods each lasting two hours, but with clearly defined objectives. In addition to the neutralization of the enemy, they wanted to achieve the following objectives:

- Maintain the element of surprise for as long as possible;
- Prevent the Italian defence forces from reorganizing during the fire preparation;

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<sup>49</sup> D. Brinc et al: *Angleško-slovenski vojaški terminološki slovar*, Ljubljana 2006, pp. 97, 166, 233.

- Provide enough artillery ammunition in support of the infantry in the later phases of the attack.

We will explain the concept of artillery support near Tolmin using the example of the planning, organization and coordination between the German Alpine Corps and the Bavarian Leib Regiment.<sup>50</sup>

On 8 October 1917, after conducting reconnaissance, the Leib Regiment commander had a coordination meeting in Neža with the commander of artillery of the German Alpine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Herold. At the meeting, they coordinated artillery support to the units of the Corps' point of attack in the Tolmin-Kolovrat direction. The Artillery Commander had 60 batteries, divided into three groups, under his command. Two of them had light and heavy batteries in their formation for close support for the Leib Regiment and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment, with the aim of opening a corridor for the breach of the first defence line. The third artillery group, composed of heavy artillery, planned to destroy the fortified infantry positions and neutralize the enemy's artillery. The rough features of the artillery preparation and attack support of the German Alpine Corps were planned in three phases.

During the night before the initiation of the infantry attack, they bombarded the enemy's artillery positions, warehouses and access routes for a couple of hours with gas shells. Before the initiation of the assault, mortar fire with mortars of all calibres from Bučenica and Kuk to the front positions in the valley, and heavy howitzers operation on individual resistance points behind the first defence line were planned. The fortification system at Leščje and Hlevnik was bombarded with light and heavy howitzers. Thus the conditions for the assault of the infantry units were formed, and the introduction of enemy reserves from the hinterland was prevented by long-range cannons.

During the infantry units attack, the batteries had close combat groups which were tasked with ensuring a barrage against the assault groups and the cessation of the demolition of resistance points even before the infantry came close to an assault distance.

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<sup>50</sup> R. von Reiss (et al): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment im Weltkrieg 1914/1918*, München 1931, p. 305.

The heavy artillery group planned demolition fire along the main positions on the Kolovrat Ridge, destroying the resistance points on Hlevnik with a rumbling fire. After the conquest of Hlevnik, heavy calibres of the group for in-depth combat at greater distances focused fire on the most important position on Kolovrat (Hill 1114) in order to form the conditions for an infantry assault. The plans for the fire preparation of the attack did not include the mountain artillery of the German Alpine Corps. With the fire hindering enemy activity, it accompanied the assault units in the attack. Objectives at altitude on hills and Ridges were planned for the field artillery.<sup>51</sup>

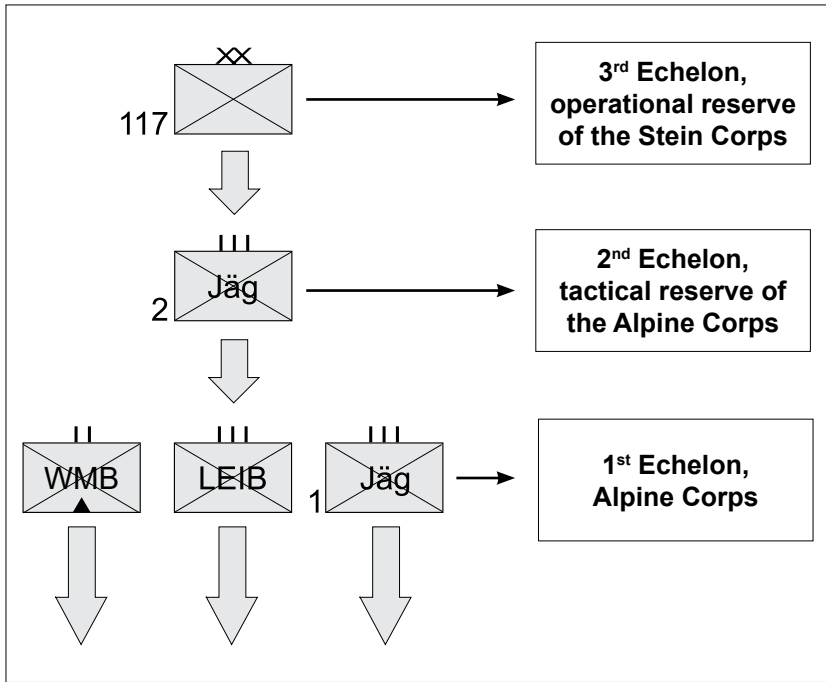
The next decisive point was the planned penetration or infiltration through the enemy's battle formation in multiple directions, which was supposed to progress into a combined penetration as soon as possible, with the support of artillery over all three Italian defence lines. In this part, the most important elements were the correct concentration and formation of combat forces, which had to guarantee a high enough level of the sustainability of forces for a deep penetration on demanding mountain terrain. From the battle disposition, we can clearly see the in-depth concentration of the forces, which guaranteed the speed and continuous pace of the attack.

For a better understanding of the attack in the main effort direction, let us look at the idea of the Stein Battle Group manoeuvre, which included the German Alpine Corps. The manoeuvre was divided into two phases. In the first, the general direction of the attack was planned to the west, in the direction of Tolmin-Matajur, with Matajur as the decisive point. In the second phase, the attack of the battle group turned in a south-westerly direction, with the central objective of Cividale del Friuli or the Tagliamento River. There were two significant natural obstacles in this sector: the Soča River and the mountain barrier Ježa-Kolovrat-Matajur-Mija. In the main-effort direction of the attack, the German Alpine Corps had the most important task. In the first phase of the attack, they conquered the Kolovrat-Matajur Ridge and thus shaped the conditions for a transition into the second phase of the attack. In the order of the German Alpine Corps attack, the following sentence was

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<sup>51</sup> R. von Reiss (et al): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment*, p. 305.

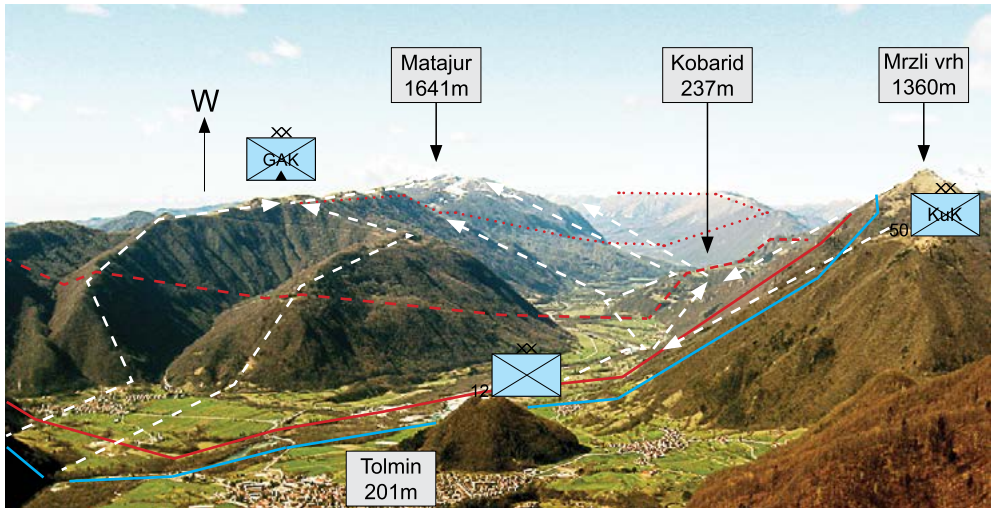
clearly written and underlined: “The implementation of the entire offensive operation depends on the advancement of the German Alpine Corps.”<sup>52</sup>



*Battle formation of the jäger and mountain units of the German Alpine Corps at the beginning of the attack on 24 October 1917 (Source: M. Kuhar)*

On the extreme right flank of the Stein Battle Group, there was the Austro-Hungarian 50<sup>th</sup> division, with the task of breaking through from the Sleme-Mrzli vrh Ridge in the Idrsko direction. Later, it had to penetrate to the top of the mountain of Mija and conquer the north-western slopes of Matajur together with the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division. The task of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division was to penetrate to Matajur through the Soča Valley so that it would direct two-thirds of the forces from Idrsko towards Livek.

<sup>52</sup> GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F 33 Nr. 30= JägerBrig Nr. 2 KTB 1917, Abschrift, Komando des Alpen-Korps, 11 October 1917, Anweisung für den Angriff des Alpenkorps, pp. 1-3.



*The fundamental idea of the Stein Battle Group's manoeuvre with the main directions of the attack for the first phase of the offensive in the Tolmin direction (Source: M. Kuhar)*

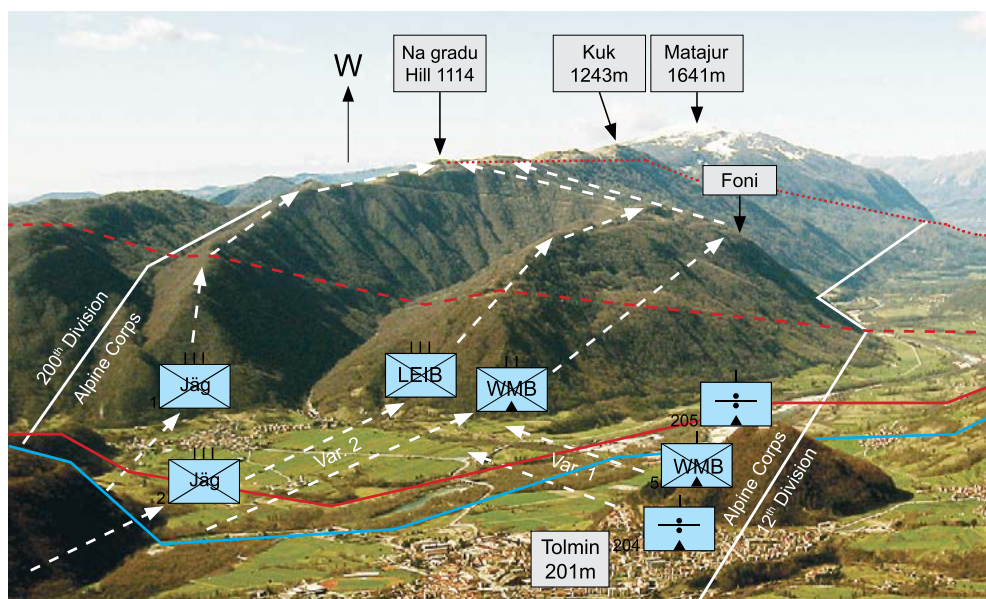
The plan of attack of the Stein Group was planned in the form of a double deep envelopment manoeuvre from the east and north-east with the objective of Matajur. This manoeuvre was the most important one for securing the Soča Valley and the opening of the main road and narrow-gauge railway links between Kobarid and Cividale del Friuli and the road link in the Idrsko-Livek-Cividale del Friuli direction.

Matajur was the target of attack of the whole Stein Battle Group, not only the German Alpine Corps. The idea for a manoeuvre with a starting point in Tolmin was based on three points:

- Strong artillery support with targets on the Krn-Mrzli vrh nad Tolminom area;
- A breakthrough in the Tolmin-Kobarid direction and attack continuation from the line Idrsko-Kobarid in the direction of Matajur (12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division and the 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian division);
- The main effort of the attack was assigned to the German Alpine Corps in the direction of Tolmin-Hill 1114-the Kolovrat Ridge-Matajur.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> T. Sprösser: *Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, Stuttgart 1933, pp. 265-266.

The conquest of the Kolovrat Ridge was also important for the advancement of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division on the left flank of the German Alpine Corps. After the conquest of Ježa, the 200<sup>th</sup> Division had a planned advancement direction of Hill 1114-the Livške Ravne road on the southern slopes of Kolovrat, which was in the area of responsibility of the German Alpine Corps.<sup>54</sup>



*The plan of attack of the German Alpine Corps to the first decisive point (Hill 1114) with two possible starting lines (1<sup>st</sup> option, 2<sup>nd</sup> option) (Source: M. Kuhar)*

For the German Alpine Corps, the first target in their area of responsibility (a decisive point) was a peak on the eastern part of the Kolovrat Ridge – Na gradu (Hill 1114). From Tolmin, there are two distinct Ridges leading to this target: the first over Hlevnik and the second over Hill 732 (Veliki Špik-Osojnica). The points of the attack were also directed along these two Ridges. The Leib Regiment was designated as the northern attack group with a direction of attack Kozlov rob-Leščje-Hlevnik-Hill 1114. During the artillery preparation of the attack, the regiment was supposed to wade the Soča River and direct itself toward the Leščje Ridge using the shortest route. From the hill of

<sup>54</sup> GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F 33 Nr. 30= JägerBrig Nr. 2 KTB 1917, Abschrift, Komando des Alpen-Korps, 11 October 1917, Anweisung für den Angriff des Alpenkorps, pp. 1-3.

Kozlov rob, it would be directly supported by a company of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the 204<sup>th</sup> and 205<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Detachments. The Württemberg Mountain Battalion was assigned to support the right flank of the Leib Regiment. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Assault Battalion of the Leib Regiment was assigned to the point of the attack of the right attack wing in the Leščje-Hlevnik-Hill 1114 direction, with the objective of conquering a tactically important peak with a swift breakthrough. Over the northern slopes of Hlevnik, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was supposed to be followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Leib Regiment; the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were to form the regiment's reserve.

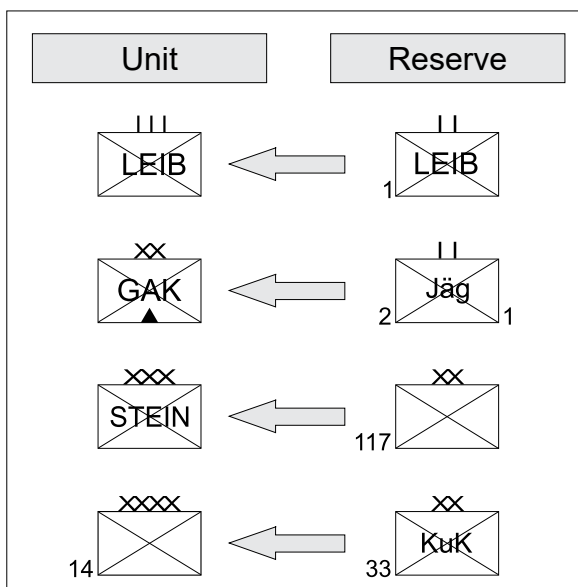
The 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment was assigned as the southern attack group, having Austro-Hungarian defence positions at Bučenica as a starting point and Veliki Špik-Hill 1114 as the direction of the attack. In the order from the German Alpine Corps Commander of 11 October 1917, it was clearly stated that the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment and the Leib Regiment were to form a link up at Hill 1114. It was of the utmost importance for the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment to protect the left flank of the Leib Regiment in such a way that they could conquer the area Klobučarji (Clabuzzaro)-Praprotnica (Prapotnizza)-Dreka (Drenchia)-Laze (Lase) and hold it for a period sufficient to allow passage of all the units of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>55</sup> The conquest of Hill 1114 would allow attack continuation toward Kuk and Matajur. For the first day of the attack, the minimum target was to conquer Hill 1114 and the maximum target the conquest of Kuk.

In the formation of the combat forces for the attack in the direction of Tolmin-Kolovrat-Matajur in the area of responsibility of the German Alpine Corps, one of the most important measures was ensuring the sustainability of the forces, enabled by forming strong reserve units at all levels. The reserve of the Bavarian Leib Regiment was its 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion; the reserve of the German Alpine Corps was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the German Alpine Corps; the reserve of the German Alpine Corps was the 117<sup>th</sup> German Division; and the reserve of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was the Austro-Hungarian 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

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<sup>55</sup> GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F 33 Nr. 30= JägerBrig Nr. 2 KTB 1917, Abschrift, Kommando des Alpen-Korps, 11 October 1917, Anweisung für den Angriff des Alpenkorps, p. 2. R. von Reiss (et al): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment*, pp. 302-304.

On 7 October, the commander of the Leib Regiment was conducting reconnaissance in Tolmin. Suggestions for additional operational possibilities for the swollen Soča River were made. One of the biggest unknowns was overcoming this obstacle, for which three options were prepared. If it were not possible to wade it, a pontoon bridge would be made south of Kozlov rob. If the water level was also too high for the second option, the starting area for all the German Alpine Corps units would be moved to Bučenica.



*Organization and formation structure of units and their reserves in the area of responsibility of the German Alpine Corps (Source: M. Kuhar)*

During this reconnaissance, the tasks of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were further specified. In the book on the history of the Leib Regiment, the only mention in this regard is that of a battalion, but it can be understood that this refers to the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. Its assigned place was on the Leib Regiment's right flank, with the task of protecting it.

- The Württemberg Mountain Battalion had to clear covert enemy positions on the north-eastern slopes of Leščje and Hlevnik, which were covered in vegetation. Thus, it facilitated the breakthrough of



the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division through the Soča Valley in the direction of Tolmin-Kobarid;

- If the breakthrough of the Leib Regiment on the Leščje Ridge or the Hlevnik Ridge stopped, the mountain battalion would allow the continuation of the breakthrough with a flank manoeuvre towards the Ridge;
- It was to occupy Italian artillery positions in the settlement of Foni.

Even though orders, plans and other documents of the German Alpine Corps did not contain a direct record of how to influence the enemy's fighting spirit or its will to fight, the later attack execution shows which decisive points the German Alpine Corps went through to reach the centre of gravity of the enemy's will to fight.

The weak moral component of the combat power of the Italian Army was an important element to which the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units directed their combat power. The Germans introduced methods of surprise, speed, shock, chaos and exploitation of opportunities into their attack plans to reach this objective.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army Command planned the surprise mostly by covert planning, unexpected time planning, unusual terrain choice, covert preparations and later, with unit movements, by deceiving the enemy as an important element. Also related to surprise was the speed of the attack, which prolonged the period of surprise. The commanders of the Leib Regiment were also aware of that and stressed that: “/.../ speed and surprise are the best allies in an attack so extraordinarily difficult.”<sup>56</sup> Surprise was mostly planned through the style of operation or manoeuvre, and partly also by time and space.

Speed of attack was important mostly so that the attacking units could overtake the enemy in its decisions. By taking the initiative, they wanted to guarantee the tactical advantage and increase effectiveness. The key to success is the speed with which we take advantage of the opportunity. A surprise is very limited time-wise, so its effects need to be exploited to the maximum.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, Arncott 2010, pp. 2-3.

With this method of operation, speed and adaptability are crucial to the attacker. This means the development of capabilities, decision-making and moving around the battlefield faster than the enemy.<sup>58</sup>

In military conflicts, shock is a sudden, focused (directed) use of force which throws the enemy off balance and causes psychological, physical and emotional disturbance. The consequence is a temporary numbness, accompanied by fear and panic and consequently the desire to escape. The impact of shock is especially significant with simultaneous loud noise, at night, and in circumstances where the enemy feels safe. Just as with surprise, the impact of shock is transitional and at a local level. This is why they both must be exploited with determination, so that they lead to success at a higher level.<sup>59</sup>

Surprise and shock, together with a fast advancement of the attacking forces, can lead to chaos on the enemy side. Infiltration and deep penetrations actually create seeming chaos. This is more than just surprise.<sup>60</sup> This type of attack creates a sense of chaos for the enemy, because the combat advances on a non-linear basis and appears to be incoherent. A deep breakthrough, especially in an area of difficult terrain, such as the mountain area, covered in vegetation, creates the appearance of the enemy coming from everywhere, from totally unexpected directions.

A breakdown in cohesion and the will to fight is most often local and temporary. A trained enemy will try to renew its combat power and look for ways to retake the initiative; this is why the breakdown needs to be exploited, extended and its effects broadened.

The exploitation of opportunities can be planned or ad hoc. In the planned exploitation of opportunities, the plans already exist and the attacker follows the expected success, simultaneously introducing new or reserve forces. Ad hoc exploitation of opportunities, on the other hand, means taking advantage of local opportunities, conducted by the forces directly available on the battlefield at that moment.

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<sup>58</sup> R. Greene: *The 33 Strategies of War*, New York 2007, p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> S. Mc Chrystal: *Team of Teams*, New York 2015, p. 28.

Exploitation of opportunities demands a decentralized approach to command, effective understanding of conditions, and strong reconnaissance units. Additionally, mobile and flexible reserves or units which can be quickly used are important in the exploitation of opportunities.<sup>61</sup>

The Germans generated these conditions based on doctrine, new concepts and attack plans. Decisive points of the critical path in a geographical area are terrain features on the battlefield, allowing the commander to reach the centre of gravity. The orders of the German Alpine Corps and their subordinate units already stated the decisive points. These were the mountain peaks on the Kolovrat Ridge, the peaks of Na gradu (Hill 1114) and Kuk, the settlement and pass of Livek, and the highest summit in this area, Matajur. The Ridges of Kolovrat and Matajur were decisive terrain in the breakthrough in the Tolmin direction, representing a natural barrier between the Soča Valley and the Po Plain. The conquest of the entire Ridge was the condition for the continuation of the attack towards Cividale del Friuli and securing the Soča Valley between Tolmin and Kobarid and the Livek Pass.

One of the most critical elements in planning any combat activity is the choice of the main effort of the direction and decisive points of attack in the geographical area. This is especially important in mountain territory, since the lack of communications and the natural barriers make it impossible to deploy forces to another direction in a short period of time.

When determining the main effort, on the operational level the commander must mainly answer two important questions: where to direct the attacking forces, and how many there should be. In doing so, the commander needs to have a clear picture of which sector can have the forces weakened so that they can be reinforced in the main effort. This means that they cannot assign too many forces to secondary tasks. A correctly defined main effort is also important, because the first phase is the most important one in the attack, with speed, momentum and severity being the strongest elements.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>62</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. X-54.

Maybe no-one has highlighted the principle and meaning of the “main effort”<sup>63</sup> as well as Alfred von Schlieffen, Head of Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces. In his analysis, he found that with the arrival of a million soldiers and the greatly increased effectiveness of the new weapons the front line expanded and became uninterrupted. For the attacker to be sure of their success, they needed to carry out a deep penetration in the decisive area.<sup>64</sup> Schlieffen advocated the principle of the concentration of forces at the decision point and the weakening of forces on other parts of the front. The concentration of forces should take place in the area where the enemy is weakest and does not expect an attack. Frederick the Great, Helmuth von Moltke Senior and Schlieffen all advocated attacks on the enemy’s flanks and in their depth. Accepting the idea of main effort had a decisive impact on the development of the modern warfare of the German Armed Forces, not only in World War I, but also in World War II.

During the planning of the breakthrough in the Upper Soča Region, they decided on the main effort of attacks at both the strategic and operational levels and the tactical level. On the strategic level, there were three options for the operation at the start of the planning. The first option, also the most easily passable considering the geographical area, would be a breakthrough in the southern part of the Soča battlefield, namely the area of Karst and Gorizia. Due to the very high concentration of the Italian units in this area, this option could by no means fit into the concept of the manoeuvre warfare of the deep penetration, which was normally carried out in the area of the weakest enemy defence. The Austro-Hungarian Supreme Command did not even have a serious debate about this option.

As already stated, Field Marshal Conrad von Hötzendorf advocated another option for a breakthrough, from the South Tyrol. Due to the dynamic and difficult mountain terrain, this option would require significantly more units, trained for mountain warfare, and very strong artillery support. Neither the Austro-Hungarian Empire nor Germany had enough units of this type. In

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<sup>63</sup> The German word is Schwerpunkt and cannot be equated with the English term centre of gravity (točka osredotočenja).

<sup>64</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. X-54.

addition, the provision of the attacking units would be very difficult due to the coming winter.

In this way, on 25 August 1917 the Austro-Hungarian Supreme Command began to develop the possibility of operations with the main effort of the attack in the Upper Soča area in the sector between Bovec and Tolmin, and in depth in the direction of Cividale del Friuli.<sup>65</sup> This option had several advantages. One of the important ones was certainly the fact that the three main Italian defence lines were closest, in terms of mutual distance, in this area. There were four kilometres of air distance and 900 metres of elevation difference between the first defence line at Tolmin and the third one at Na gradu (Hill 1114). At this distance, one could give uninterrupted support to the assault attacking units with artillery without interim movement of the weapon systems. Additionally, the majority of the geographical area was medium mountains which enabled easier and faster manoeuvrability, and they were not yet snow-capped with the autumnal drop in temperature. One important tactical reason was also that this part of the theatre of operation was considered to be quite calm, and the Italians did not expect an offensive operation of this scale in the late autumn season.

On 4 October 1917, the commander of the German Alpine Corps, General von Tutschek, presented an attack order to the commanders of the subordinate regiments in Mlino at Bled; in it, he also clearly defined the main effort of the attack: “The 14<sup>th</sup> Army will form three groups for the main body of the attack at Tolmin and the area lying south of it.”<sup>66</sup> These were the battle groups of Stein, Berrer and Scotti.

The planning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive was demanding and complex. It was not just about the implementation of the conquest of the geographical area manoeuvre. At the time, the main focus was the manoeuvre, the fighting spirit of the Italian units, and of course the geographical area. Correspondingly, they chose units for the attack which had already mastered the new concepts of deep penetration into the enemy’s battle formation, assisted by artillery units.

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<sup>65</sup> V. Klavara: *Plavi križ (Blue Cross)*, Klagenfurt 2000, p. 217.

<sup>66</sup> R. von Reiss (et al.): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment*, p. 300.

## Formation of forces for the offensive

The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is known for the new tactic used by the Germans in the offensive near Riga shortly before. The idea of a breakthrough in the valley between Tolmin and Kobarid was developed by the Austro-Hungarian General Alfred Krauss. His idea was to avoid high and defended peaks, as this would make it easier to encircle and isolate the Italian troops, assuming, of course, that the mountain Ridges would be decisively attacked and that the initiative would be taken. The weather, the unfavourable terrain for defence, the low morale of the Italian soldiers, and the lack of Italian reserves contributed to the success of the Central Powers in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, in addition to the tactical innovations and the wrong decisions taken by the Italian generals.<sup>67</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army units, together with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Austro-Hungarian Army units on their left, were subordinate to the Austro-Hungarian command of the South-Western Front, commanded by Archduke Eugen. He met with Generals Below and Dellmensingen on 15 September 1917, and his Chief of Staff explained the plan of the offensive to them. It was decided that Krauss's 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps would be part of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, as this would make it easier to coordinate the military operations up to the Tagliamento (*Slo. Tilment*) River. The Austro-Hungarian breakthrough plan was based on the fact that further attrition of the Austro-Hungarian Army in the Kras region, and any form of breakthrough in this part of the battlefield was impossible, so a decisive breakthrough must begin at the Tolmin Bridgehead. The plans also included a breakthrough at Bovec (at the initiative of General Krauss and with the consent of the Chief of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, General von Dellmensingen) in order to cut off the Italian units on Polovnik, in the Krn Mountains, from the north, and "tighten the pincers" at Kobarid. According to the plan of the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, the corps were given the lines of operation which were to converge at the passes along the middle reaches of the Tagliamento: Gemona del Friuli (*Slo. Humin*)-Osoppo-Cornino-Pinzano al Tagliamento-Dignano-Codroipo. The Soča armies used the offensive operations to prevent the

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<sup>67</sup> M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, p. 378; M. Thompson: *The White War*, pp. 296-297; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 13.

transfer of reinforcements from the area of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Italian Army to the area of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army, towards which the attack of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was to be directed. A major weakness of this offensive plan, however, was its assessment of success. When success exceeded expectations and the offensive reached the Piave (*Slo. Piava*) River, the command did not have a real new objective, and the opportunity to expand a small Bridgehead in the lower reaches of the Piave River near San Bartolomeo, or to attack Monte Grappa with strong enough forces, was missed. Moreover, the Germans time-constrained the borrowing of units, and although they extended it until the end of the year, the uncertainty affected strategic planning. German cooperation was influenced by the offensive in Flanders, where the British repulsed the Germans with heavy losses.<sup>68</sup>

Road and rail connections with Tolmin and Bovec were poor. Most of the military units, together with the entire logistics, moved to the starting line across the Predel, Vršič, and Petrovo Brdo Passes, and by rail from Jesenice to Most na Soči. A German aircraft was also important during the preparations for the offensive, as it had an advantage in the air, and prevented the take-off of the Italian observation aircraft; at the same time, it took accurate photographs of the Italian lines of defence and the rear area. German cartographic sections produced accurate maps of the Italian defence positions and main communications, which they used successfully for the purposes of the offensive.<sup>69</sup>

Preparations for the offensive, scheduled for 15 October 1917, were carried out in great secrecy. In five weeks, 2400 railway convoys delivered the following items from the interior of the monarchy and from foreign lands to the Tolmin Bridgehead and the Bovec Basin: 140,000 soldiers; 1452 cannons (of which 354 were of medium and heavy calibre); 420 mortars; 1,500,000 cannon shells; 3,020,000 detonators; 2,000,000 signal cartRidges; 800 tons of explosive; 2000 kilometres of ignition cord; 230,000 steel helmets; 238,000 gas masks with 500,000 replacement filters; 1300 railway wagons of construction material; 200 railway wagons of sanitary material; 150 railway wagons of telephone cables;

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<sup>68</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 173.

<sup>69</sup> K. von Dellmensingen: *Lo sfondamento*, p. 63.

100,000 pairs of hiking boots; 68,000 horses; 200,000 blankets; and 50,000 pairs of crampons. The engineering units were also important, as they brought 54 pontoon bridges and 81 engineering troops to the Bridgehead rear area.<sup>70</sup>

The preparations for the offensive were carried out in great secrecy; cannons and ammunition were brought to the starting positions first, while the infantry arrived on foot just before the offensive. The preparations were hampered by bad weather, which prevented several units from arriving to the positions on time. Most of the military units and material arrived at the front line via Kranj-Škofja Loka-Podbrdo/Cerkno-Most na Soči. Krauss's team came from Kranjska Gora and Vršič, and from Tarvisio (*Slo. Trbiž*) and Predil (*Slo. Predel*). German troops arrived at the front from the Gorenjska region. The units disembarked at various locations between Ljubljana and Jesenice, from where they reached the Tolmin Bridgehead by various routes. Most of the transport took place at night, in great secrecy. While the marshalling of units and material at the Tolmin Bridgehead was successful, Krauss's 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps failed to marshal its units, so the start of the attack was postponed from the morning of 15 October to the morning of 24 October. The delay was the result of disorganization in the Austro-Hungarian rear area, and the favouring of German transport. The German 14<sup>th</sup> Army tried to deceive the enemy by concealing the starting position of the offensive and its main objective; the German troops thus landed in Tyrol and in the vicinity of Sežana, and transmitted false commands to the units by radio. A large part of the German troops came to the starting positions in Austrian uniforms. General von Below was on a trip to Trentino, and the German Alpine Corps appeared in Trentino on 13 September.<sup>71</sup>

False demonstrations gave the impression that the attack would be carried out from the direction of South Tyrol. The 1<sup>st</sup> Soča Army made preparations for a false attack in the Kras region, and so did the navy. Despite the attempts to deceive the Italians, some soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian army fled to the Italian side with the Austro-Hungarian army's plans of the offensive. The

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<sup>70</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 174; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 297.

<sup>71</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 175; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 297; J. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 17.



Italian observation aircraft did not detect anything special, and confidence in the effectiveness of the defence system prevailed on 22 October, when Cadorna hosted the Italian king on the mountain of Stol. Cadorna assured him that nothing special was to be expected in this part of the front, and that a breakthrough in this part of the battlefield was impossible.<sup>72</sup>

The objectives of Austria-Hungary in the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive were much more limited at first, as the plan was to penetrate across the Soča River; however, after a meeting between von Below, von Dellmensingen, and Archduke Eugen on 15 September 1917, it was decided to push the enemy across the former frontier and, if possible, to the Tagliamento. General Borojević doubted that the Austro-German troops would be able to reach the Tagliamento.<sup>73</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> Army and the Austrian 1<sup>st</sup> Corps were under the command of the South-Western Front. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army, with its command in Kranj, consisted of three corps and an army reserve.

## **Command and structure of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army**

Commander: General Otto von Below

Chief of Staff: General Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen

Artillery Commander: General Richard von Berendt

Austro-Hungarian 15<sup>th</sup> Corps – Commander Field Marshal Karl Scotti, Chief of Staff Colonel Robert von Pohl:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army, in the southern part of the Tolmin Bridgehead: Commander Field Marshal Josef Metzger. The artillery commander was Colonel Gallistel, who commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Brigade. The division numbered a total of 11 battalions and 41 batteries.
- The 5<sup>th</sup> German Division: Commander General Hasso von Wedel. The artillery commander was General von Reutzenstein, who

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<sup>72</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 175; M. Thompson: *The White War*, pp. 297-298.

<sup>73</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 145.

commanded the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 53<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Battalions, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Heavy Artillery Regiment. The division numbered a total of 9 battalions and 37 batteries.

The 51<sup>st</sup> German Corps – Commander General Albert von Berrer, Chief of Staff Lieutenant Colonel von Heymann, later Captain Hahn:

- The 26<sup>th</sup> German Division: Commander General Eberhard von Hofacker. The artillery commander was Colonel Erlenbusch, who commanded the 29<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment and the 26<sup>th</sup> Mountain Artillery Regiment. The division numbered a total of 9 battalions and 17 batteries.
- The 200<sup>th</sup> German Division: Commander General Ernst von Below. The artillery units consisted of the 257<sup>th</sup> and 600<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiments. The division numbered a total of 11 battalions and 55 batteries.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> German Corps – Commander General Hermann von Stein, Chief of Staff Lieutenant Colonel Haack:

- The 117<sup>th</sup> German Division: Commander General Seydel. The artillery commander was Lieutenant Colonel Budusch, who commanded the 233<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Regiment. The division numbered a total of 9 battalions and 12 batteries.
- The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division: Commander General Arnold von Lequis. The artillery commander was Colonel Nehbel, who commanded the 21<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, which was further reinforced by the Austro-Hungarian artillery units of field artillery, heavy artillery, and mortars. The division numbered a total of 9 battalions and 30 batteries.
- The 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division: Commander General Karl von Gerabek. The artillery commander was Colonel Alfred Mazza, who commanded the 29<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade. The division numbered a total of 11 battalions and 30 batteries.
- The German Alpine Corps: Commander General Ludwig von Tutschek. The corps' main body was the 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Jäger (Light

Infantry) Brigade (Leib Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment). The brigade was joined by the Württemberg Mountain Battalion of Major Theodor Sprösser at the rank of regiment, which also included First Lieutenant Erwin Rommel. The corps artillery was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Eduard von Herold, who commanded the 240<sup>th</sup> and the 68<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiments, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Heavy Artillery Regiment. The corps numbered a total of 11 battalions and 53 batteries.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps – Commander General Alfred Krauss, Chief of Staff Colonel Edward Primavesi. The corps included three divisions:

- The 55<sup>th</sup> Division, Commander General Felix Schwarzenberg, with two and later three Bosnian-Herzegovian regiments, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from Klagenfurt; the 26<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade and the 38<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The artillery commander was Colonel Stering, who commanded the 93<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Brigade. The division numbered a total of 11 battalions and 21 batteries.
- The 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle (Infantry) Division, Commander General Rudolf Müller, with the 43<sup>rd</sup> and 98<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigades. The artillery commander was Colonel Stering, who commanded the 43<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Brigade. The division numbered a total of 12 battalions and 22 batteries.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Edelweiss Division, Commander General Heinrich Wieden von Alpenbach, with the 216<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 217<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The artillery commander was General Adler, who commanded the 53<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Brigade. The division numbered a total of 10 battalions and 23 batteries.
- The Jäger Division, which was in reserve: Commander General Georg von Wodtke. It consisted of the 4<sup>th</sup>, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalions. The artillery commander was Major von Lochow, who commanded 22 batteries.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps was formally subordinated to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army; the corps artillery consisted of 17 batteries with 48 heavy and medium cannons and howitzers. The Austro-Hungarian command designated the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division, and the 13<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division as the army reserve. The 29<sup>th</sup> Division was a reserve of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, while the other three divisions were reserves of the South-Western Front. Later, the 35<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division of the Cossack Corps and the 94<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army were assigned to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. The Germans sent 36 reconnaissance aircraft, 24 fighter jets, and 48 bombers to the operational zone. Also in reserve were the German Jäger Division of Commander Colonel Georg von Wodtke, with 7 battalions and 12 batteries. This division was in Kranjska Gora. The army command included 6 batteries of heavy mortars and howitzers, 4 mobile platoons of field artillery, and 3 fighter squadrons.<sup>74</sup>

### **Deployment of German and Austro-Hungarian units before the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps of General Krauss was deployed to the right wing, from the mountains of Rombon to Batognica:

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Edelweiss Division from the top of Rombon to the Bovec-Predil road;
- The 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division between the Bovec-Predil road and the mountain of Javoršček;
- The 55<sup>th</sup> Division from Javoršček to the mountain of Krn.

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<sup>74</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 176-177; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 47; P. Gaspari: *La verità su Caporetto*, Udine 2012, pp. 42-43; E. Glaise von Horstenau (Ed.): *Österreich-Ungarns lätzter Krieg : 1914-1918*, Bd. 6, *Das Kriegsjahr 1917*, Vienna 1936, pp. 524-536.

The corps of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army were deployed as follows from the settlements of Slemen to Kanalski Lom:

General Stein's 3<sup>rd</sup> Bavarian Corps:

- The 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division from Batognica to the peak of Vodel (north of the village of Dolje);
- The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division from Vodel to Tolmin;
- The German Alpine Corps from Tolmin to Modrejce;
- The 117<sup>th</sup> German Division in reserve in Podmelec.

General Berrer's 51<sup>st</sup> German Corps:

- The 200<sup>th</sup> German Division from Modrejce to Sela pri Volčah;
- The 26<sup>th</sup> German Division in reserve at Ponikve on the Šentviška planota Plateau.

General Scotti's 15<sup>th</sup> Corps:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division from Sela pri Volčah to Gorenji Log, and in the railway tunnels south of Most na Soči;
- The 5<sup>th</sup> German Division in reserve in Modrej.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army of General Johann Henriquez was on the left wing of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, with its headquarters in Logatec and 11 divisions stationed between Gorenji Log and Solkan. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army was able to rely on the 9<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> Divisions as its reserves.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 177.



The Soča Front before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive (Source: Marco Mantini)

# THE 14<sup>TH</sup> ARMY AND MOVEMENT OF THE GERMAN ALPINE CORPS TO THE SOČA BATTLEFIELD

## **Movement and concentration of forces**

The movement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in September and October 1917 from various battlefields across Europe to the Italian Front was a project and a feat worthy of great attention and detailed study by military historians and experts in military theory and practice. The complexity of the entire project was an important source of experience from today's perspective, especially because the main part took place in the territory of today's Republic of Slovenia. The following chapter analyzes the movement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army from several different levels and aspects. First, the theoretical and historical grounds for the military movements of units at the strategic, operational and tactical levels will be presented. These originate from the Moltke-Schlieffen doctrine at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The concepts of the movements at the operational and tactical levels will be described next. The movements of two German units which fought during the height of the attack in the Kobarid breakthrough will be presented in more detail, based on the participants' records, analyses, discussions, and archival documents. These were the Bavarian Leib Regiment and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion.

The success of the operation initially depended on the rapid and covert concentration of forces before the conflict. The forces gathered at the point of main effort and at the main point of attack. The concentration of forces at the right time and in the right place is the most important condition for victory. In general, if you try to ensure a balance of forces against the enemy

everywhere, then the end result is just the opposite – you are weak everywhere. It is therefore important to ensure combat superiority at a decisive point.<sup>76</sup>

Timely detection of the concentration of forces is the most important thing for the enemy during the preparations for an operation, as it allows for measures and movements of forces in good time. In addition, movements of armies, corps, and divisions, with all their logistic support, are hard to carry out unnoticed. Even the best plan of attack is shattered at the outset if the enemy has a clear picture of the order of battle of the forces on the opposite side. At the operational level, good security and deception measures are paramount in supporting an operation. Prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the German units acted with covert movements of their divisions to the Upper Soča Region.<sup>77</sup>

When searching for answers to the question of how the concentration of forces in the Upper Soča Region took place before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, it should be emphasized that the planning, preparation and implementation processes all took place at the same time, due to the lack of time. The processes of combat decision-making and the preparation of plans; the gathering of intelligence and reconnaissance; additional training and equipping of units; and the movement and concentration of forces took place in September and October 1917.

The movement and concentration of forces is the first major implementation phase of any operation, and it is a combination of movement and mobility. The movement of forces of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army took place at strategic distances, as units came to the Upper Soča Region from all the European theatres of operation. The movement was carried out at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.<sup>78</sup>

The movement of forces for the attack in the Upper Soča Region at the *strategic level* began in September 1917, when units were transferred from other theatres of operation (the Eastern and Western Fronts, Romania, Macedonia) to the Italian battlespace in the Upper Soča Region. The main

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<sup>76</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. VII-5.

<sup>77</sup> D. A. Grossman: *Maneuver Warfare in the Light Infantry, The Rommel Model, Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, Vol. 101, Issue 12, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. VI-5.



and most important means of transport in the first phase of movements was the train, on the well-branched and organized railway system within Germany and Austria-Hungary. At that time, rail transport enabled the rapid relocation of larger units, and was therefore an important part of combat and logistic support. The units were initially assembled in Austrian Carinthia, the Drava Valley, in the wider area of Villach (*Slo. Beljak*) and Klagenfurt (*Slo. Celovec*).

A phase of movements at the *operational level* followed in early October 1917, when the units were relocated within the theatre of operation with Italy. Gradually, the units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army were moved from the Drava to the Sava Valleys, and then to the immediate vicinity of the front line. The operational phase was much more demanding, due to the mountainous terrain, bad weather, and lack of road and rail connections. The entire 14<sup>th</sup> Army, with all its logistic support, moved across the two great mountain barriers of the Karavanke range and the Eastern Julian Alps. In addition to the main railway connection from Villach via Jesenice to Ljubljana, the only possible railway connection in the immediate vicinity of the front line was the railway line from Jesenice to Baška grapa to Grahovo ob Bači. Due to the congestion of railway traffic, many units left Carinthia on foot and continued across the Upper Sava Valley to the start line of the attack in the Soča Valley. From Carinthia, the main road connections passed over the Jezersko, Ljubelj, Korensko sedlo and Tarvisio (*Slo. Trbiž*) Passes. There were four road connections from the Upper Sava Valley to the Soča battlefield.

The Kranjska Gora-Vršič-Trenta road was the key auxiliary direction of attack. There were three road corridors along the main direction: from Škofja Loka across Podbrdo to Baška grapa; across Cerčno to Most na Soči; and across Idrija to Most na Soči. The first and second marching columns of the German Alpine Corps were assigned an extremely strenuous marching direction: Bled-Bohinjska Bistrica-Baško sedlo-Baška grapa. The march from Bohinjska Bistrica over the pass of Baško sedlo to Podbrdo was particularly demanding.<sup>79</sup> In this operational part of the deployment, the units only marched at night so that the Italian reconnaissance flights would not discover the concentration of forces in this area.

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<sup>79</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 262.

In this respect, the Germans had a very good understanding of the concept of the strategic shift of the best combat units from one theatre of operation to another. They achieved the effects of surprise at strategic distances by moving their units not only within a single battlefield, but across the entire European theatre of operation, from unexpected directions and locations. One of the best examples is the battle route of the German Alpine Corps, which fought on all fronts during World War I, and was involved in the most important operations in Europe.<sup>80</sup>

An example of the strategic movements of the German Alpine Corps during World War I is a concept that the world superpowers still have in their doctrines today. This is the principle of dispersed capability operation, with the forces concentrating in a specific area at a specific time.<sup>81</sup> In today's military terminology, this method of operation is called "swarming".<sup>82</sup>

The successful concentration of combat forces requires the fulfillment of basic conditions to enable the operation to continue successfully: a flexible command and control system; good intelligence; covert operations that prevent enemy countermeasures; a high level of the concentration of forces; and effective movement control. The concentration of forces on the battlefield in the Upper Soča Region was a special challenge for the units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, mainly due to the geographical factors. The mountainous terrain of the Julian Alps between the Upper Sava Valley and Tolmin had very poorly branched road and railway connections. Moreover, movement was hampered by bad weather with rain in the lower lying areas and snow in the mountains. The newly formed 14<sup>th</sup> Army had little time to move and concentrate its forces, while at the same time hiding its intentions from the enemy.

The next important decision was to determine the areas and methods of the concentration of forces. There are two basic methods in war and military theory: the concentration of forces on and off the battlefield.<sup>83</sup> The planners of the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive decided to concentrate their forces outside the battlefield.

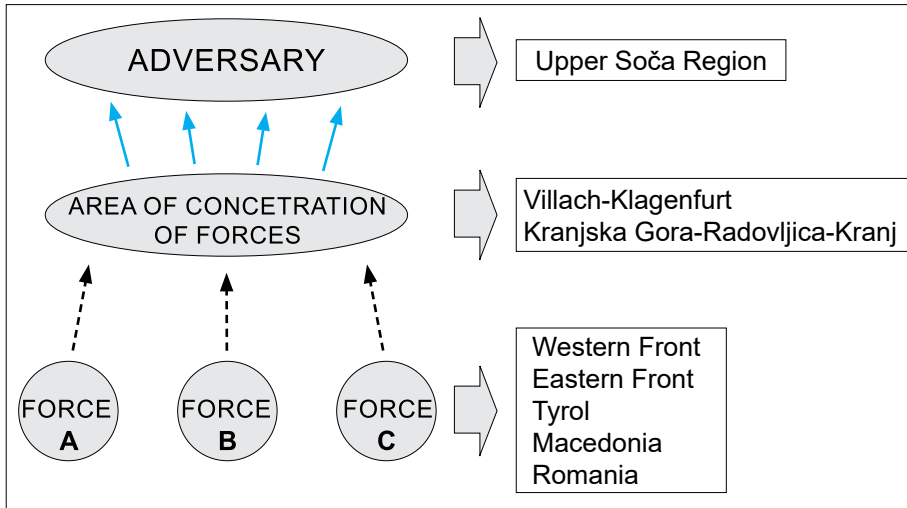
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<sup>80</sup> R. Kaltenege: *Das Deutsche Alpenkorps in ersten Weltkrieg*, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> US Army: *Win in a Complex World*, Pamphlet 525-3-1, Washington 2014, p. 2/18.

<sup>82</sup> The German term is "Schwärmen".

<sup>83</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. VII-8.



*Schematic diagram of the concentration of forces outside the battlefield, and the implementation in the geographical area before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive (Source: M. Kuhar)*

The prolonged safe concentration of forces directly on the front line was almost impossible, due to the limited space for force deployment and the great exposure to enemy artillery fire in the area. In addition, the reconnaissance and combat activity of the Italian aircraft operating far into the Austro-Hungarian rear area, all the way to Jesenice and Škofja Loka, had to be taken into account, despite the German countermeasures.<sup>84</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command thus decided to concentrate its forces in stages. The first stage consisted of moving to the assembly area, the second to the preparation area, and the third to the line of departure. The areas were geographically linked by three major rivers: the Drava, Sava and Soča.

<sup>84</sup> N. B. Kodrič: Prva svetovna vojna iz župnijskih kronik leto 1917, *Loški razgledi*, No. 44, 1997, p. 7.



Movements of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units to the front in the Upper Soča Region from 15<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1917<sup>85</sup>

The assembly area was in the Drava Valley in Carinthia, and it was intended for the units and forces to assemble there. The units arrived from various battlefields across Europe, and were brought mostly by train. Additional training of units with a focus on mountain warfare and training with the Maxim MG 08/15 light machine guns took place in the assembly area (some units were only just introducing these machine guns into operational use).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, Annex.

<sup>86</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, Westport 1995, pp. 129-130.

In addition, units were formed for the main and auxiliary directions of attack, material resources were provided, and movement to the preparation area was organized.

The *preparation area* of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was set in the wider area of the Sava River from Kranjska Gora to Ljubljana. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command was in Kranj, and the temporary command of the German Alpine Corps was in Bled. The units continued their training in the preparation area, despite the bad weather and the strains they had endured. In this phase, the units carried out the processes of combat decision-making, reconnaissance, coordination of movements, and logistic support, and, if necessary, rearranged themselves and prepared to move directly to the starting area of the attack. The preparation area was relatively far from the front line for two reasons. It was impossible to concentrate forces for long periods of time closer to the front line, as the Italians could have easily determined the main effort of the attack by air reconnaissance.

The last stage of movement, with the transfer of units to the line of departure, was particularly demanding in terms of organization. Infantry assault units moved to the front line mostly on foot, due to the overcrowding of the trains. Movement orders<sup>87</sup> specifically emphasized that the roads had to be empty during the day, and thus the units only moved at night. The Germans prepared well for the movements. This can be deduced from the orders and records of outside observers. The parish priest in Sorica wrote about the Germans at the time: “They act very confidently. They have excellent regulations; they post guards all along the road so that everyone can receive the necessary explanations. There are signs everywhere on the road: Gutes Wasser (Good Water); kilometres written on the signs; locations of bivouacs; warnings of road bends for drivers /.../”<sup>88</sup>

The units of the German Alpine Corps, which were stationed in the wider area of Bled and Radovljica, were divided into three marching groups. The commander of the first marching group was the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Brigade. The group included the Leib Regiment and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment. The commander of the second marching group was the commander of the

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<sup>87</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 262.

<sup>88</sup> N. B. Kodrič: *Prva svetovna vojna iz župnijskih kronik leto 1917*, p. 98.

2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment. In addition to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment, the marching group included the mountain artillery detachment No. 6, the medical company No. 239, and the unit of pack animals No. 7. The first and second marching groups advanced through Bohinjska Bistrica and Podbrdo to the wider area of Tolmin.

The third marching group was commanded by Major Sprösser, commander of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. In addition to the battalion, this marching group also included artillery and medical units. The group marched via Kranj-Škofja Loka-Zali log-Podbrdo, to the wider area of Tolmin. According to their orders, the German Alpine Corps was to move from the Sava Valley to the wider area of Tolmin on 15 October 1917.

Parallel planning was necessary, as otherwise the implementation of the October offensive would be questionable. The planning, organization, equipping, and training of units took place simultaneously with the concentration of forces. The units received warning orders while moving from the assembly to the preparation area, and on to the line of departure. This required excellent coordination and a high level of training of the commanders. The units arrived at their assigned areas at different times. The battle routes of the Bavarian Leib Regiment and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion from Carinthia to the Upper Soča Region are presented below, to make it easier to understand how the movements took place and what happened during the movements.

## **Transfer of the Leib Regiment from Tyrol to the Soča Front**

The Bavarian Leib Regiment, an integral part of the German Alpine Corps, was on an operational break in September 1917, but still planned its training. They carried out marches, swam in Lake Caldonazzo near Trento, and, above all, trained with new light machine guns. Moreover, their deployment in the Trento area was an effective measure for deceiving the enemy. This was a way of informing the Italians that the focus of attack was being prepared in the Tyrolean sector of the front.

The Leib Regiment, meanwhile, received the news that General von Tutschek, who was previously the brigade commander, had taken command of the German Alpine Corps.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1917, the General visited the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the Leib Regiment, and presented its members with decorations. At that time, the commander of the Leib Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Epp, fell ill, and the command of the regiment was temporarily taken over by Major Robert Bothmer, otherwise the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in the same regiment.

Timeline of the Leib Regiment's movement from Tyrol to the Soča Front in October 1917<sup>89</sup>

Date	Activity
1 October	The regiment commander ordered the Leib Regiment to move from Trento to Carinthia.
4 October	Transport of the regiment by train from South Tyrol via Lienz and Spittal to Arnoldstein (south-west of Villach), where the units disembarked. At Bled, the commander of the German Alpine Corps presented the regiment commanders with an order to carry out an offensive in the Soča Valley.
5 October	The regiment marched via Arnoldstein-Korensko sedlo-Kranjska Gora-Javornik. The night was spent in Kranjska Gora and on the mountain of Javornik. The commander of the Leib Regiment drove with a small group in a reconnaissance vehicle via Radovljica-Kranj-Škofja Loka-Petrovo Brdo-Podbrdo-Kneža.
6 October	The regiment marched in via Kranjska Gora-Javornik to the accommodation facilities in the villages along the Sava Bohinjka River according to the following plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regiment headquarters and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion: Bohinjska Bela, Mlino pri Bledu;</li> <li>• 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion: Ribno, Bodešče;</li> <li>• 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion: Kamna Gorica, Lipnica, Kropa.</li> </ul> The commander of the Leib Regiment reconnoitered the Tolmin Bridgehead in the area of Tolmin Castle.

<sup>89</sup> R. von Reiss (et al.): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment im Weltkrieg*, pp. 298-308.

Date	Activity
8 October	The Leib Regiment's commander carried out command reconnaissance with the reconnaissance elements of battalions in the preparation areas and at the lines of departure. A coordination meeting with the artillery commander of the German Alpine Corps was held in Kneža.
14 October	Movement of the Leib Regiment's mortar company via Škofja Loka-Podbrdo-Tolmin.
16 October	After the arrival of the 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalions at Bohinjska Bela, the regiment marched via Bohinjska Bela-Bohinjska Bistrica at night, where the soldiers settled down and spent the night.
19 October	The regiment carried out a night march in very poor and cold weather via Bohinjska Bistrica-Ravne-Baško sedlo (1281m)-Podbrdo. It was snowing on Baško sedlo and a strong wind was blowing.
20 October	The 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalions arrived in Podbrdo drenched by rain and with half-frozen uniforms in the morning after a 17-hour march. In the evening, the units continued their march via Podbrdo-Grahovo-Podmelec. The regiment command and the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Battalion arrived in Podmelec late at night, and spent the night there.
21 October	The 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion arrived in the village of Sela nad Podmelcem early in the morning. The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion arrived in the village of Brnica in the morning, where the soldiers settled.
22 October	Due to the high level of water in the Soča River, the line of departure for the regiment's attack was moved from the Tolmin area to the northern slopes of the mountain of Bučenica. The order for attack was issued at 3:00pm; the attack was to begin on the morning of 24 October. The Leib Regiment's battalions began to move into the Austro-Hungarian defence positions and caves on the northern slopes of Bučenica at 5:30pm. The 3 <sup>rd</sup> Battalion was in the front line, followed by the 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion; the pack animals stopped in the village of Modrejce. The 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion remained in the village of Sela nad Podmelcem due to the soldiers' fatigue.
23 October	The units remained in trenches at the starting positions; in the evening, the 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion moved from the village of Sela nad Podmelcem to the line of departure at Bučenica.

The Leib Regiment's commander inspected his area of responsibility from Tolmin Castle on 6 October. Members of the regiment inspected the land in



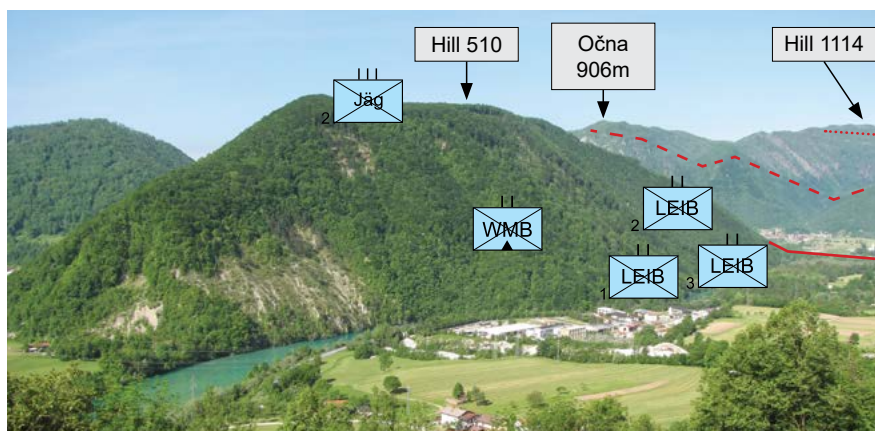
terms of its topographic features, and studied the possibilities and advantages of the area for attack. Using binoculars, they specifically studied the direction of the planned attack: the church of St. Daniel-Leščje-Hlevnik-Hill 1114, the Ježa area, and the system of Italian defence positions. After their analysis they emphasized the following:

- The attack would require soldiers with high morale and physical fitness due to the complexity of the land;
- The main effort of the attack must be along the Leščje-Hlevnik Ridge;
- Hlevnik and Hill 1114 must be occupied on the first day of the attack;
- The Soča River represented a major natural obstacle for the regiment. The first option was to cross it, the second to cross a pontoon bridge which would be built by the vanguard. If the river's water level was too high, the line of departure would move to the mountain of Bučenica. This would mean an increased risk for the units when passing the wide open space around the Church of St. Daniel;
- The minimum objective on the first day of attack was Hill 1114.

Immediately after the return of the Leib Regiment's commander to Bohinjska Bela, its members continued their intensive final preparations, and completed the process of combat decision-making and planning for the attack. A pioneer company under the command of Captain Brankho was sent to the area of Tolmin Castle as an advance party to prepare everything for the crossing of the Soča River near Tolmin. The units were additionally equipped with uniforms, ammunition, and hand grenades. Each infantry company was reinforced by five light machine guns with associated ammunition. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions also tested a lighter version of the soldier's combat load. The regiment had to prepare for independent operation without vehicles, which were left in Bohinjska Bela and Radovljica. Additional equipment was transported with the help of pack animals.

On the evening of 16 October, most of the regiment began a five-day march to the starting area. They were hindered by heavy rain and even snow on Baško sedlo, which made this part of the march extremely demanding. From the written sources of the regiment's history, it can be concluded that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was physically the best prepared, and was later also involved

in the height of the attack. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion arrived at the line of departure on Bučenica a day later than the other two battalions due to fatigue. Unlike the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, the units at the line of departure were deployed along the trenches of the first Austro-Hungarian defence line on the north-western slopes of Bučenica, and waited there for the attack to begin.



*Deployment of the German Alpine Corps' assault units at the line of departure on 23 October 1917 on Bučenica (Source: M. Kuhar)*

## Movement of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion from Carinthia to the Soča Front

At the beginning of preparations for the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive in September 1917, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was not yet part of the German Alpine Corps. It came under the command of the Austro-Hungarian Krauss Corps on 10 September 1917 in the Drava Valley in Carinthia. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army Commander, General Below, presented a penetration plan along the auxiliary route Bovec-Žaga-Stol on 28 September in Kranjska Gora; the plan also included the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. On the basis of this order, the battalion immediately began to prepare to move via Villach-Kranjska Gora-Vršič-Trenta to the line of departure for the attack north of Bovec.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 260.

A good week later, on 6 October 1917, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was visited by the commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, General von Below, with his aide-de-camp. He informed the commander of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, Major Sprösser, of the order to redeploy his battalion from the Krauss Corps to the German Alpine Corps.<sup>91</sup> This took place at Wernberg Castle in Carinthia.

The members of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion received the news with mixed feelings. They were still reliving the battles in Romania on Magura Odobesti (1001m), where they had fought under the command of the German Alpine Corps together with the Leib Regiment in January 1917.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, the battalion members focused their attention on the implementation of the newly assigned task, as they had to be prepared to move to the broader area of Radovljica by 10 October.

Timeline of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion's movement from Carinthia to the Soča Front:<sup>93</sup>

Date	Activity
10 September	The Württemberg Mountain Battalion was assigned to the Austro-Hungarian Krauss Corps in Carinthia.
6 October	The commander of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Army's Württemberg Mountain Battalion issued an order for redeployment to the German Alpine Corps.
9 October	Major Sprösser issued an order to move the Württemberg Mountain Battalion from Carinthia to the broader area of Radovljica in two groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Rommel detachment, consisting of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Companies, the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company, the Signals Company, and the Mortar Company;</li> <li>• The Gössler detachment, consisting of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Mountain Companies, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Companies.</li> </ul>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>92</sup> R. von Reiss (et al.): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment im Weltkrieg*, pp. 253-263.

<sup>93</sup> Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (HStAS), M411, Bd 2115, Kriegstagebuch, 11 October 1917-26 February 1918.

Date	Activity
10 October	Movement of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion to Förderlach railway station in Carinthia.
11 October, cold	Loading of material resources onto the train, and the movement of four transport trains via Förderlach-Villach-Rosenbach-Jesenice to the assembly area of the 14 <sup>th</sup> Army. The commander of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion reported to the command of the German Alpine Corps in Bled in the morning; there he became acquainted with the plan of the marching groups which would move from the Sava Valley to the Tolmin area. He also learned of the warning order for attack at the Leib Regiment's headquarters in Bohinjška Bela in the afternoon.
12 October, wet	Arrival of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion at the railway station in Podnart, and true subordination to the German Alpine Corps.
13 October, wet	Organizing the deployment of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion by units and places: Württemberg Mountain Battalion Command: Radovljica; Rommel detachment: Zgornji and Spodnji Otok, Gorica, Vrbnje; Gössler detachment: Ljubno, Podbrezje.
14 October, heavy rain	The Württemberg Mountain Battalion was stationed in its assigned villages. Major Sprösser issued an order for the third marching group to proceed via Radovljica-Škofja Loka-Kneža.
15 October, occasional heavy rain	The Rommel detachment began to move via Otok-Mošnje-Podbrezje-Zgornja and Spodnja Bistrica-Britof at 5:00pm. Arrival in Britof was followed by a rest period.
16 October, wet	The march of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion continued via Bistrica-Naklo-Kranj-Škofja Loka at 5:00pm. The Württemberg Mountain Battalion's command spent the night in Škofja Loka, while the troops spent the night in Spodnje Bitnje, Žabnica, and Sveti Duh.
17 October	Rest for the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, which remained at the same locations.
18 October	Rest for the Württemberg Mountain Battalion which remained at the same locations.
19 October, rainy	A difficult hike in the dark and rain through the Selca Valley via Škofja Loka-Železniki-Zali Log. The march began at 5:00pm; the soldiers arrived in Zali Log late at night. The troops of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were stationed in barns, haylofts and houses.

Date	Activity
20 October, wet and cold	March via Zali Log-Petrovo brdo-Podbrdo-Grahovo-Kneža.
21 October	The Württemberg Mountain Battalion arrived in Kneža in the early hours of the morning. The units were stationed in a mountain hut above the railway station, and the command was stationed south of Kneža railway station. They ate at Kneža railway station. The 1 <sup>st</sup> Jäger Brigade issued the order to attack. Major Sprösser and the detachment commanders inspected the starting positions on the northern slopes of Bučenica.
22 October	In the evening, a march took place via Kneža-Bača pri Modreju-Stopec-Modrej-Bučenica.
23 October	The units remained hidden and concealed on the northern slopes of Bučenica. They were supplied with food and additional ammunition in the evening.

Archival documents show that the Württemberg Mountain Battalion had relatively little time to plan the attack. Unlike the Leib Regiment, Major Sprösser did not have the opportunity to reconnoitre the area of the Tolmin Basin before the march. In the current situation, he depended on the information he had received on 11 October from the Leib Regiment in Bohinjska Bela. He had four days to prepare from the time he received the warning order to the time of his departure to Tolmin. Orders were also issued during the march. Major Sprösser issued two orders and an instruction on 14 October, mainly relating to the movement of units from the assembly area to the starting area in Kneža.

The first battalion order<sup>94</sup> was a short warning order for the attack and the movement of units. It listed the commanders and important officers of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army Command and the German Alpine Corps Command. It briefly described the coming attack on the Italians, followed by brief instructions for the march beginning on 15 October. All vehicles had to be handed over by the evening of 17 October, and only the use of pack animals was allowed for transportation. The order was signed by Major Sprösser as commander of the third marching group.

<sup>94</sup> HStAS, M130, Bü 53, Württemberg Gebirgs Bataillon, Bataillonsbefehl, 14 October 1917.

On the same day, a more detailed order was issued for the march of the third group.<sup>95</sup> It defined the deployment areas of the units in seven points before the march, and the march plan to Stara Loka near Škofja Loka. The marches only took place during the night and with appropriate time delays, in accordance with the general order of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army.

The march began on 15 October at 5:00pm with the following objectives of the daily stages:

- Rommel, his staff, and half of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion moved from the village of Otok to the villages of Britof and Bistrica (but not to the village of Tabor);
- The Mountain Howitzer Battery No. 17 moved to the village of Ovsiše;
- The Mountain Signals Detachment No. 311 arrived in the village of Zalošče;
- The Medical Company No. 201 moved to Podnart;
- The Field Hospital No. 44 arrived in Otoče.

The march was ordered to continue on 16 October via Naklo-Kranj-Žabnica. Three more subgroups were formed within the third marching group, whose march was planned in three time intervals. First Lieutenant Rommel, his staff, and half of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were scheduled to begin the march at 6:00pm. Captain Gössler and the second half of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, the Mountain Howitzer Battery No. 17, and the Mountain Signals Detachment No. 311 were ordered to begin the march at 6:30pm. The Mountain Artillery Detachment No. 4, the Medical Company No. 201, and the Field Hospital No. 44 were ordered to begin the march at 7:15pm.

The order also predicted a half-hour break in front of the northern entrance to the town of Kranj. The next order was to be received at the railway station in Kranj on 16 October at 7:00pm. After that, an order was to be received on 17 October at 12:00pm at the location of the overnight stay of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion's headquarters in Stara Loka. On 14 October,

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<sup>95</sup> HStAS, M130, Bü 53, Deutsches Alpenkorps, Marschgruppe III, Marschbefehl, 14 October 1917.

instructions<sup>96</sup> were issued for the redeployment of the pack animals, and the takeover of certain material assets. The instructions listed the equipment that the Württemberg Mountain Battalion's units had to take over on 15 October at 10:00am in the village of Otok, and in the battalion's warehouse at Podnart/Kropa railway station at 3:00pm on the same day. The timeline shows that the resources were received on the day on which the march began in the evening. The situation and conditions during the march were also described in the parish chronicles: "The night of 16 to 17 October was awful. Everyone tried to get inside the houses. They almost always came at night for fear of enemy aircraft ... (Žabnica)."<sup>97</sup>

Rommel described the march to Baška grapa as a demanding and arduous task. The soldiers moved at night, mostly in heavy rain; during the day they hid in villages, mostly on farms with haylofts and stables, and in farmhouses. Although the food was modest and monotonous, the mood in the company was excellent.<sup>98</sup>

Sprösser, Rommel, Schiellein, Wahrenberger and Gössler left to inspect the starting positions on the northern slopes of Bučenica after arriving in Kneža on 21 October. While moving, they were hindered by Italian artillery fire, which was focused on the area between Bača pri Modreju and Most na Soči. The inspection of the Bučenica area showed that the deployment of units would be difficult to carry out, due to the partially overgrown steep rocky slopes, interrupted by narrow ravines. The greatest risk for the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was the Italian observatories on Mrzli vrh (1360m), which had an open view of the area in good visibility. Artillery fire directed at the steep rocky slopes would cause many casualties. Commanders in the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were aware that the greatest challenge would be unit concealment and good camouflage discipline, as the troops would remain in the area for over thirty hours.

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<sup>96</sup> HStAS, M130, Bü 53, Württemberg Gebirgs Bataillon, Besondere Anordnungen, 14 October 1917.

<sup>97</sup> N. B. Kodrič: Prva svetovna vojna iz župnijskih kronik leto 1917, p. 102.

<sup>98</sup> E. Rommel: *Pehota napada*, p. 12

On the same day, the 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Jäger Brigade, which included the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the Leib Regiment, received an order with specific objectives. According to this order, the mountain of Matajur was determined as the main target of the attack.<sup>99</sup>

The units completed their preparations in Kneža on 22 October, and marched to their starting positions on the slopes of Bučenica in the evening, where they arrived around midnight. They were hindered by strong headlights from the Italian positions on the mountains of Kolovrat and Ježa during the march, and by frequent artillery fire. This repeatedly forced them to lie motionless on the wet ground for several minutes.<sup>100</sup> The pack animals were left on the eastern slopes of Bučenica, and the remaining units arrived at the starting area on 23 October shortly after midnight. The soldiers were digging trenches about 500 metres north-east of the top of Bučenica (510m) until the morning. Shelters for one or two soldiers were covered with branches. Thus concealed and drenched by rain, the troops tried to get some sleep during the day. Rommel wrote that the day had dragged on indefinitely, and that the soldiers got very little sleep due to the Italian artillery attacks. Fortunately, only a few grenades landed near their positions.<sup>101</sup> In the evening, the pack animals brought food for the units directly to the positions, followed by additional ammunition. Experience from the previous battles in the mountains clearly exposed the problems caused by a lack of ammunition. After midnight on 24 October it began to rain again. Rommel wrote: “The weather is perfect for the attack!”<sup>102</sup>

If we look back at the last thirty hours before the attack began, we can only imagine the conditions under which the units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion operated. This alone shows the exceptional physical and mental fitness of the troops. The rain, the cold, soaked clothing, and poor nutrition were certainly a great test of readiness, endurance, and discipline. The soldiers faced the risk of hypothermia due to the cold, the rain, and sleeping outdoors, especially given the fact that their meals were poor, and they could not warm up by exercising. The units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were

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<sup>99</sup> HStAS, M130, Bü53, Gefechts-Bericht 24-31 October 1917, p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> E. Rommel: *Pehota napada*, p. 10.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.



aware of the importance of the moral component of fighting power. Rommel described it in this way:

“The supply was modest and monotonous, but the mood was nonetheless excellent. During the three years of war, the units had learned to endure a hard life without losing their flexibility.”<sup>103</sup>

## **Conclusions on the importance of the concentration of forces**

The phase of the concentration of forces on the battlefields was very important for the later success of the attack. If we compare the concept and approach of the opposing armies of 1917, we immediately notice the difference. It is probably a coincidence, but the fact is that on 18 September 1917, both warring parties issued two important orders on the same day. On the one side, Archduke Eugen sent orders to all the participating forces to begin preparations and carry out the offensive in the Upper Soča Region. On the other side, General Cadorna issued an order by the Italian Supreme Command on the transition of all the Italian forces to defence.<sup>104</sup> Both armies began their operations on the same day.

From then on, events began to take place in a diametrically opposite manner, which was also one of the reasons for the success of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and the defeat of the other side.

Immediately afterwards, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army began intensive preparations, which were only intensified by the beginning of the offensive. It had clearly set goals, a well-formulated and updated doctrine, and a motivated and trained army. What stood out in the 14<sup>th</sup> Army is the unity of effort and command. In addition, its covert operation, deception and discipline left the Italian side almost completely in the dark until the beginning of the attack.

On the Italian side, there was disunity of effort and a command crisis. The greatest problem was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army under the command of General Capello, who disobeyed the order of the supreme commander to transition to defence.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>104</sup> M. Bizjak: Kobarid in general Luigi Capello malce drugače, *Na fronti*, No. 8, 2013, p. 44.

His intention, of defence and immediate counteroffensive, was unclear and incomprehensible to his subordinates.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's units which experienced the main attack of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army remained in an attack formation, and were not rearranged for defensive action. Thus, they did not have an effective response to the new tactic of deep penetrations, especially with the artillery which was primarily stationed along the front lines of defence. It is known that the movement of units on mountainous terrain requires more time than on flat ground, but the units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army reached almost all the important points of attack in the first fifty hours.

## THE ITALIAN 2<sup>ND</sup> ARMY BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF THE OFFENSIVE

### The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army command

At the end of October 1917, two Italian armies on the Soča battlefield were subordinate to General Luigi Cadorna, whose headquarters was in Udine. The southern section of the front was controlled by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army of General Emanuele Filiberto di Savoie (Duca d'Aosta), and the northern by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army of General Luigi Capello. The function of the Chief of Staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was carried out by Brigadier Silvio Egidi, and the Army Headquarters was in Cividale del Friuli. Due to illness, General Capello was replaced by General Luca Montuori between 18 and 22 October and after 25 October. On the eve of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army had 670,000 soldiers; 9 corps with 25 divisions, which totalled 353 battalions; 3702 pieces of artillery (2568 field, mountain and light cannons, and 1134 mortars); and more than 3000 machine guns; 10 aircraft squadrons; and 8 balloon sections.<sup>105</sup>

The area of operation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army stretched from the mountain of Rombon to the mouth of the Vipava River into the Soča River. The Italian army had more than a million soldiers in the entire Soča battlefield, together with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and the reserve units. Capello's units were unevenly distributed across several lines of defence: two Italian corps and one division were on the left wing (which was also the area of penetration of the 14<sup>th</sup> German Army); and seven corps were on the right wing.

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<sup>105</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 181-182; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 300.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 64 battalions, covered the area from Rombon to the Soča River near the settlement of Gabrje; and the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 49 battalions, covered the area from the Soča River near Gabrje to the village of Kal nad Kanalom. The 24<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 36 battalions, covered the area from Kal to Podlaka; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, with 42 battalions, covered the area from Podlaka to the Dol Pass, south of the mountain of Sveta Gora. The 6<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 24 battalions, controlled the area from Dol to the area south of Grazigna; and the 8<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 36 battalions, controlled the area from the Kostanjevica monastery to Vipava. The 7<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 30 battalions, was in reserve on the second line of defence, between Matajur, Kuk and Savogna; and the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 24 battalions, between Deskle and Kanal, and near Kostanjevica. The area of Cormons-Corno di Rosazzo was controlled by the 28<sup>th</sup> Corps, with 42 battalions. Capello's decision to leave only 10 of the 25 divisions in the area north of the Banjšice plateau (*It. Bainsizza*) is interesting. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's command considered the mountains to be a defence in themselves, so none of the thirteen Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army divisions, which were in reserve, were deployed in the sector north of Tolmin. Thus, the Tolmin Bridgehead, which was strategically most important to the German army, became the weakest point of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's defence.<sup>106</sup>

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps

The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps was commanded by General Alberto Cavaciocchi from July 1917, with Colonel Giorgio Boccacci as Chief of Staff. The operational area of the corps' operations stretched from Rombon to the village of Dolje, and was considered a safe and peaceful area, defended by poorly trained and mostly unmotivated Italian units. The corps headquarters was in the village of Kred, and the corps consisted of several divisions that were among the main culprits in the unsuccessful defence of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive.

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<sup>106</sup> P. Gaspari: *La verità*, p. 40; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 300; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 123; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 181-182; M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, pp. 376-377.

General Giovanni Arrighi's 50<sup>th</sup> Division consisted of the Friuli Brigade, the 280<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Foggia Brigade, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Alpine Group of the Ceva and Monviso Battalions, and the Rombon Crew, consisting of the Borgo San Dalmazzo, Saluzzo, Dronero, and Friuli Brigade Battalions. All 13 battalions were deployed from Rombon across Bovec and Soča to Planina Jama (Jama mountain pasture) on Polovnik. The division consisted of 24 machine gun companies, the division artillery with field and mountain cannons and mortars, and three companies of the engineer battalion with signal units. General Angelo Farisoglio's 43<sup>rd</sup> Division consisted of the Genoa Brigades, the 223<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the Etna Brigade, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group with the Val Chisone, Albergian, and Belluno Battalions. The division also included three engineer companies and signal units, six machine gun companies, and the division artillery with field and mountain cannons and mortars, so that the division had a total of 15 battalions. The division headquarters was in Drežnica, and their area of operation stretched from Planina Jama on Polovnik to the peak of Pleče below Krn. The 46<sup>th</sup> Division was commanded by General Giulio Amadei; it consisted of the Caltanissetta and Alessandria Brigades; the 224<sup>th</sup> Etna Brigade Regiment; 29 machine gun companies; three engineer companies; four flame thrower companies; signal units; and the division artillery with field artillery and mortars. The division's headquarters was in the village of Smast, and consisted of 18 battalions; the area of operation of its units was from Pleče below Krn to the mountain of Hlevnik.

General Luigi Bassi's 34<sup>th</sup> Division consisted of the Foggia Brigade. The Potenza Brigade did not take part in the battles of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. The division numbered nine battalions, and its headquarters was in Kobarid. The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps reserve also included the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiments, and the Mondova and Argentera Alpine Battalions. The corps also had at its disposal the 7<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group with the Val Leogra, Bicocca and Valle Stura Battalions; the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Squadrons of the 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Alessandria Light Cavalry; the 214<sup>th</sup> Platoon and the 94<sup>th</sup> Carabinieri Squad; the corps artillery with mountain artillery and mortars; 15 machine gun companies; 2 signal companies and an engineer company; the 43<sup>rd</sup> Financial Guard Company; and the 21<sup>st</sup> Airlift Squadron.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army only had a few units in the areas of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' 46<sup>th</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> Divisions, not all of which occupied the areas intended for their operation. The first line of defence from the mountains of Mrzli vrh and Vodil vrh to the valley was the extreme limit which was occupied by the Italian army in the first days of the beginning of the Front in 1915, and was therefore not well defended. Cavaciocchi did not take the orders sent to him by Cadorna seriously. Nevertheless, on 19 September, he did send an order to his division commanders, stating that the offensive might be ready the next day or at the end of the month. His order did not contain any precise instructions, and sounded more like a recommendation, so it did not initiate any movements of the subordinate units. After the meeting of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps Command, Cavaciocchi was given more detailed instructions on how to consolidate the poorly defended sections, but did not strengthen the defence. To get an objective picture of the state of mind in the army, Cadorna sent two intelligence officers, Colonels Calcagno and Testa, to inspect the 4<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> Corps. Cadorna sensed that the preparations for defence in the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps were not going according to his instructions, but Cavaciocchi assured Testa that everything was under control and that preparations were underway and morale satisfactory. Upon their return, the Colonels reported that the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps Command had intuitively concluded that the enemy might try a double grip from the Bridgehead and Bovec, but did not notice any special preparations being underway. The Italians ruled out a frontal attack; they did not believe in an attack along the Soča Valley; and they mostly relied on the Polovnik-Vršič defence system.<sup>107</sup>

It was not until 22 October that Cavaciocchi realized that the defence in his sector was unsatisfactory, and suggested to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Command that the defence positions in the area of Bovec be strengthened by relocating some units from the 50<sup>th</sup> Division. Cadorna visited the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' headquarters on the same afternoon, and talked to Generals Montuori and Cavaciocchi about how to strengthen their defence (General Montuori was substituting for General Capello). Cadorna did not want to interfere with the operational orders on the transfer of units, but wanted to strengthen the defence in the

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<sup>107</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko*, p. 186; P. Gaspari: *La verità*, p. 40.

Bovec Basin. He made appropriate decisions based on the new intelligence. He was convinced that the offensive from Bovec across Žaga, Učja, and on to the Tagliamento River could be successful, and that it would most likely begin the next morning. Therefore, at 7:35pm, he issued an order to transfer the incomplete 34<sup>th</sup> Division from the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps to the area of Žaga. The division arrived at the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps the day before the offensive, and consisted only of the Foggia Brigade with the 280<sup>th</sup>, 281<sup>st</sup> and 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiments, so Cavaciocchi added the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiments, which had been in reserve until then. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was in Livek, and the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment was near Idrsko in order to defend the area between Soča, Foni and the mountain of Hlevnik. The 280<sup>th</sup> Regiment was sent to reinforce the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Bersaglieri Regiments were sent to the 43<sup>rd</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> Divisions, so that only the 281<sup>st</sup> and 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiments remained in the key area of defence around Žaga. Capello returned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Command on 23 October, and became concerned about the events in the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps. The weakness of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' defence was also seen in the fact that Cavaciocchi only had 20 cannons with little ammunition stationed between Bovec and Krn, so that the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Corps artillery could not fulfil their defence tasks.<sup>108</sup>

Due to the successful and rapid penetration of the German 12<sup>th</sup> and the Austro-Hungarian 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions, it is important to describe the defence system of the units of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division on the first line of defence from Krn to Tolmin. The Alessandria Brigade operated on the right wing of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division, the Caltanissetta Brigade in the centre, and the 225<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Etna Brigade on the left wing. The Italians organized a reception defence line between Kožljak and Pleče due to the shortcomings and exposure of the first line of defence on the mountains of Sleme and Mrzli vrh. As many as 13 of the 18 battalions of this division were thus deployed on the first line of defence, within a range of ten kilometres. Three battalions had to cover the flanks and maintain communications, and represented a border with units of the adjacent divisions. Two regiments were in the brigade and division reserves. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment operated in the area between Vrsno and Libušnje, and there were about 40 batteries of various calibres in the area between the first

<sup>108</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, pp. 183-185; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 182-183; P. Gaspari: *La verità*, p. 45.

and second lines of defence. The defence consisted of three companies of the Alessandria Brigade in the area around the village of Gabrje, on the first line of defence: two between the road and the Soča, and one between a small fort above the road and Hill 360 above Gabrje. The area of Gabrje was defended by three field batteries. An isolated machine gun company on Hlevnik (which was the operational area of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' 19<sup>th</sup> Division) and eight batteries near Foni were also subordinate to the 46<sup>th</sup> Division; there were eight corps artillery batteries on Hlevnik and Pleče which had no protection.<sup>109</sup>

## The 27<sup>th</sup> Corps

The 27<sup>th</sup> Corps was commanded by General Pietro Badoglio; its Chief of Staff was Lieutenant Colonel Giulio Pellegrini. The operational area of the corps' operation was from the village of Gabrje to the settlement of Breg on the Banjšice Plateau and the village of Kal nad Kanalom. Its headquarters was in the settlement of Kambreško from 24 October onwards; before that it had been in Cividale del Friuli. General Giovanni Villani's 19<sup>th</sup> Division consisted of the Taro, Spezia, and Napoli Brigades; two flame thrower units; the 154<sup>th</sup> Territorial Militia Battalion; the Val d'Adige Alpine Battalion; 26 machine gun companies; the 55<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion; and an engineer battalion with signal units. The division numbered a total of 27 battalions, which were deployed from Hlevnik to Sela pri Volčah. General Guido Coffaro's 65<sup>th</sup> Division only consisted of the Belluno Brigade, with five battalions, whose area of operation stretched from Podselo to Mešnjak. General Giambattista Chiossi's 22<sup>nd</sup> Division consisted of the Pescara Brigade, with six battalions, and a flame thrower unit. The division's area of operation stretched from Mešnjak across Hoje to Kal nad Kanalom. General Vittorio Fiorone's 64<sup>th</sup> Division consisted of four Belluno Brigade Battalions, the Roma Brigade, and the Taro Brigade Battalion, so that the division numbered a total of 11 battalions which had the same unit formation as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division. The entire corps' reserve was the Puglia Brigade, deployed between the mountains of Globočak and Čičer. In addition, the corps had at its disposal the 10<sup>th</sup> Alpine

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<sup>109</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 182; P. Gaspari: *La verità*, pp. 94-95.



Group of the Vicenza, Monte Berico and Morbegnio Battalions; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lancieri Aosta Cavalry Squadron; heavy artillery, mountain artillery and mortar corps artillery; two engineer battalions and two signal companies; the 23<sup>rd</sup> Financial Guard Company; and the 40<sup>th</sup> Airlift Squadron.<sup>110</sup>

All Badoglio's units and the 19<sup>th</sup> Division's artillery were deployed in a system of offensive operation, which was not in accordance with Cadorna's orders.

On 10 October, Cadorna again ordered Capello and Badoglio to change the deployment of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' units, which both Generals interpreted in their own way.<sup>111</sup> The formation of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division's units in the area of the front breakthrough on 24 October was as follows: three battalions of the 10<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group were deployed to the rear area on Hill 1114; fourteen Spezia Brigade companies were deployed between the mountains of Varda and Ježa, while five were in reserve; the Taro Brigade was deployed between Čiginj and Hlevnik; and a battalion of the Napoli Brigade was deployed on the line from Pleče to Foni. The Spezia Brigade Battalion and the Val d'Adige Alpine Battalion were in reserve. The remaining five battalions of the Napoli Brigade protected the Za Gradom and Trniški vrh Passes. The area between the 10<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group and the Spezia Brigade was covered by only one machine gun company. The Taro Brigade was deployed from the upper reaches of the Gunjač Stream to Hlevnik, where it had five battalions.

The 27<sup>th</sup> Corps was thus given the task of defending the Hlevnik-Foni-Soča line together with the Napoli Brigade. Most units of the Napoli Brigade were not close to the front lines, but far away in reserve in the rear area, below the mountain of Kolovrat. When Montuori sent the Napoli Brigade to the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, the demarcation line between the 27<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Corps was also moved, so Cavaciocchi informed Badoglio that he would withdraw his 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment and the machine gun company to the left bank of the Soča River near Gabrje on 22 October. Badoglio accepted the message, but did nothing to fill the resulting void. Hlevnik remained almost unprotected, as it was only defended by two companies of the Taro Brigade, and sixty cannons of medium and heavy calibres of Badoglio's 19<sup>th</sup> Division. It was never explained why

<sup>110</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 183; P. Gaspari: *La verità*, p. 41.

<sup>111</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, p. 106.

Badoglio did not send the entire Napoli Brigade to the line, as he had been ordered to do.<sup>112</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> line of defence or the line of key defence between Pleče and Foni was guarded by only the 76<sup>th</sup> Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Napoli Brigade, which did not occupy the area from Foni to Soča. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions of the 76<sup>th</sup> Regiment guarded the 3<sup>rd</sup> line of defence in the area of Bukova Ježa to the pass of Hill 1114 and the Za Gradom Pass. The entire 75<sup>th</sup> Napoli Brigade Regiment and parts of the Arno Brigade were on and behind the mountain of Trniški vrh.<sup>113</sup>

The poorly defended area of Hlevnik and Kolovrat around Hill 1114 corresponded to the attack of the German Alpine Corps, which broke through the front line right in this part of the front. Since being promoted to the rank of General, Badoglio had become very self-satisfied; he became one of the most popular Italian Generals as the conqueror of Sabotin, and his military career climbed steeply, mainly because of good connections in Italian politics. He did not allow his corps artillery commander to open fire on the day of the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive until he had asked for Badoglio's approval. Thus, on 24 October at 2:30am, the commander of Badoglio's artillery called him for approval to use fire, but Badoglio did not allow it, saying that they had too few grenades in reserve. When Badoglio later wanted to activate the corps artillery, he no longer had communication with the commander. Not all of Badoglio's artillery failed though; some Austro-Hungarian units of the Scotti Corps were exposed to heavy Italian artillery fire, which brought numerous losses to the attackers<sup>114</sup>.

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<sup>112</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, pp. 117, 147; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, pp. 186-187; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>113</sup> P. Gaspari: *Rommel a Caporetto : le gesta degli italiani e dei tedeschi tra il Kolovrat e il Matajur dal 24 al 26 ottobre 1917*, Udine 2016, pp. 28-29; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 182.

<sup>114</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 301; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 187; L. Galić: *Cvetje – Mengore: v viharju vojne 1915-1917*, Kobarid 2017, p. 210.

## The 7<sup>th</sup> Corps

The 7<sup>th</sup> Corps was commanded by General Luigi Bongiovanni; its Chief of Staff was Colonel Rodolfo Bianchi d'Espinoza. The corps, which had its headquarters in the village of Carraria near Cividale del Friuli, and later in the village of Praprotnica, had an area of operation between the mountains of Matajur, Kolovrat and Globočak. It operated in the rear, in the area of the 3<sup>rd</sup> line of defence. It numbered 30 battalions in total, which were included in General Giuseppe Viole's 62<sup>nd</sup> Division. The division consisted of the Salerno Brigade, the 4<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Brigade, the 4<sup>th</sup> Arditi Assault Detachment, ten machine gun companies, and command of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Battery Regiment.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Corps' command also included General Ettore Negri di Lamporo's 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, with the Elba and Arno Brigades, eight machine gun companies, and three engineer companies. The corps had no reserve units, but it had two squadrons of the Udine Light Cavalry, two signal companies, the 35<sup>th</sup> Airlift Squadron, and the Florence Brigade. It was supposed to operate in the rear in the army reserve, but soon after the beginning of the offensive on 24 October, it reached the first line of defence in the morning, and was ineffective in performing its defence tasks.<sup>115</sup>

## Command and control crisis

General Luigi Cadorna was known as a strict and precise man who had been supposed to assume the post of Chief of the Italian Supreme Headquarters as early as 1908, but the Italian politics at the time opted for the younger and less experienced General Alberto Pollio, as Cadorna was too autocratic. Cadorna advocated iron discipline, which was to raise the morale in the armed forces. He severely punished the violation of orders and military discipline, which many Italian soldiers paid for with their death.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, Ljubljana 1998, p. 189; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 183; P. Gaspari: *La verità*, pp. 40-41.

Shortly after the 11<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, at the end of August 1917, Cadorna considered an offensive against the Trnovo Forest Plateau, but under the pressure of events on the Italian and Russian fronts, he cancelled the offensive on 18 September, and ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies to prepare for defence. The commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, General Duca d'Aosta, complied with Cadorna's command, and consolidated the 3<sup>rd</sup> Italian Defence Line in the Kras region, and prepared it for a defensive operation. The commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, General Luigi Capello, however, disobeyed Cadorna's order, and was still considering a counter-offensive, also transferring this mentality to his corps commanders. He was convinced that potential military operations by the enemy would not take place until the spring of 1918, when enough Austro-Hungarian units would have returned from the Russian Front. The Italian decision for defence at the time meant a major change in the strategic thinking of the Italian army's leadership; the Italians exhibited a lack of defence experience because they had constantly attacked in the first eleven offensives, and had rarely carried out defence at a tactical level.<sup>117</sup>

In addition to switching to defence, on 18 and 22 September Cadorna ordered his armies to convince the enemy of the Italian army's offensive and aggressive plans, but his order had no impact on the corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army. Cadorna's main and most difficult objective was to relocate the artillery, which had until then been deployed closer to the first lines of defence, due to the offensive plans of the Italian army. He ordered the artillery to be relocated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> defence line, and even further into the rear in some areas. Cadorna focused his main preparations on defence and on preparing the armies to repel a possible attack.

After two years, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army had consolidated the system of three fortified lines of defence, which enabled a more flexible defence. The system of defence in the area of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was less developed than in the southern part of the Soča battlefield. It was characterized by the lines of defence, which were not adapted to the terrain and did not have adequate depth. Although Capello

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<sup>116</sup>J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 26.

<sup>117</sup>P. Gaspari: *La verità*, p. 19; M. Thompson: *The White War*, pp. 297, 299; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 26, 32; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*), p. 179.

defended the counter-offensive action, he ordered a defence to be organized in the rear of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' 19<sup>th</sup> Division on the line Mrzli vrh-Kum-Globočak, due to the reports of a possible enemy attack. Meanwhile, Cadorna demanded the acceleration of defence preparations, and the relocation of the majority of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps to the right bank of the Soča River. In the end, four alpine battalions were sent to the right bank of the Soča River, only two days before the beginning of the offensive. An order to withdraw 730 cannons from the Banjšice Plateau was also disregarded; 120 cannons were moved from there only on 23 October.

Several conferences of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army were convened in October, at which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's leadership received the necessary information and formed general guidelines for the operation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army units. Capello only chaired two conferences; he attended the conference on 17 and 18 October, but did not chair it because he was on sick leave. Analyses of the first and last conferences show a change in mood on the Italian side. The minutes of the conferences show that the conferences were actually Capello's command dictation and a form of notification, which was rather superficial according to the minutes, and included information that could have been communicated to the subordinate commanders in a more timely manner. Dr Matjaž Bizjak points out that the documents talk about a "conference", but it was not a conference as we know it today. It was more about informing and providing guidance to subordinate commanders.<sup>118</sup>

The planned Austro-Hungarian offensive was discussed at the conference of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army in Cormons as early as 2 October. The predominant concept at the time was Capello's plan to organize a counter-offensive; in addition, the topics discussed were the motivation of soldiers, the artillery, and communications. There was no talk of Cadorna's order of 18 September, which made it clear that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army must move into defence. It is also interesting that the fear of German troops spread among the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, while Capello felt that the artillery was positioned too offensively and too close to the front line. This proved to be true right after the beginning of the German and Austro-Hungarian offensive.

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<sup>118</sup>M. Bizjak: Kobarid in general Luigi Capello malce drugače, *Na fronti: revija za vojaško zgodovino*, No. 8, 2013, pp. 43-53.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army learned of the movements and gathering of enemy units on the right wing of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps and in front of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps. The second group of enemy units was supposedly gathering on the left side of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, and in front of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps near Čepovan and Lokve. It was predicted that the attackers would penetrate from the Tolmin Bridgehead to the Sveta Gora-Vodice line, which was the main objective of the enemy's offensive. The minimum objective was to break through the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> lines of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps on the right side of the Soča River, or manoeuvre south of Tolmin with the aim of occupying the Tolmin Basin. Italian predictions said that an attack from the Tolmin Bridgehead along the valley of the Idrija River towards Cividale del Friuli was also possible. Italian intelligence had the disadvantage of being collected at the army level, and was only passed on to the subordinate commands after the intelligence analysis. Such a centralized approach to data collection and analysis was not effective; in addition, the Italian intelligence services cooperated poorly with each other. The Italian reserves were deployed in accordance with Capello's idea of an immediate counterattack. He trusted both commanders of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, and the minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's conference also show great confidence in his power.<sup>119</sup>

A conference of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was convened in Cividale del Friuli on 23 October, and on that day Capello returned from sick leave. The minutes show that six enemy divisions were planned to be in position from Rombon to the Tolmin Bridgehead. Capello was trying to reassure his subordinates, who felt uneasy; there was no more triumphant optimism, and an increasing fear of the unknown. It was assessed that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's formation was good, and that the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps needed to be strengthened. No new decisions or measures were taken at the conference, which indicates a crisis of command associated with Capello's departure on sick leave. Capello did not prepare his army for a decisive defence, nor for a counter-offensive; in addition, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had insufficient information about the enemy.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Archivi di famiglie e di persone, fondo Capello Luigi 1911-1959, busta 7, Sunto delle parole dette da S.E. il generale Capello i giorni 17 e 18 ottobre ai comandanti dei corpi d'armata, 18. ottobre 1917, pp.1-4; M. Bizjak: Kobarid in general Luigi Capello (Kobarid and General Luigi Capello), pp. 43-53; L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, pp. 137, 139, 205.

The literature mentions defections of Austro-Hungarian officers of Czech, Romanian, and Polish nationality to the Italian side, bringing with them the news of and plans for the offensive. Looking at the defection of the Romanian officers, we can conclude that the importance of these offensive plans is often overemphasized. We must bear in mind that the Austro-Hungarian officers were at battalion level, and were only familiar with plans for the offensive up to the level of brigade, but not higher, so the Italians were not able to get an insight into the entire offensive plan.<sup>121</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was gathering reserve units behind its right wing, which indicates that Capello expected an attack between the mountain of Ježa and the Banjšice Plateau, although he possessed certain parts of the 14<sup>th</sup> German Army's penetration plan. Thus, 121 Austro-Hungarian and German battalions and 113 Italian battalions faced each other in the area of the penetration of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. We must bear in mind that the Italians had more reserve units in the rear area.<sup>122</sup>

A month before the beginning of the offensive, General Cadorna was mainly focused on domestic politics, as the Italian political leadership wanted to control the Italian Supreme Command. Until mid-September 1917, Cadorna did not believe that the enemy's offensive would take place before the spring of 1918, and the measures he had carried out were intended to man and reorganize the units, which were exhausted by the last three offensives of the past year. On the other hand, General Capello had already had some information about the enemy's intentions. He sent a message to the commanders of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Corps at the end of September 1917 about the possibility of an Austro-Hungarian offensive at the Tolmin Bridgehead, with the aim of breaking through by the Soča River. He ordered the movement of certain Italian units closer to the Tolmin Bridgehead. In addition, he ordered an inspection of the

<sup>120</sup> ACS, Archivi di famiglie e di persone, fondo Capello Luigi 1911-1959, busta 7, Conferenza tenuta da S.E. il generale Capello alle ore 16 del giorno 23 in Cividale ai comandanti dei corpi d'armata, pp. 1-3 ; G. Badoglio: *Il Memoriale di Pietro Badoglio su Caporetto*, Udine 2000, p. 30; F. Fadini: *Caporetto dalla parte del vincitore: il generale Otto von Below e il suo diario inedito*, Milano 1992, p. 169.

<sup>121</sup> M. Bizjak: Kobarid in general Luigi Capello, pp. 43-53.

<sup>122</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, p. 106; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 183.

abandoned and unfinished lines of defence in this part of the front. Capello was convinced that the enemy would organize the offensive in the area of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army, but he did not know exactly where its main effort would be.

Competition and careerism among the Italian commanders, the bureaucratic incompetence of the Italian Supreme Command, and ignorance of the intelligence analyses by military intelligence services also contributed greatly to the poor Italian readiness for the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. On 15 October 1917 military intelligence sources revealed that the attack would follow a prolonged artillery fire with chemical weapons. On 22 October, military intelligence services estimated that the enemy had 421 battalions or 35 and a half divisions along the Soča Front, nine of them German, but this information was not of concern to the Italian Generals. Capello held to the idea of a counter-offensive across the Kal-Lom Plateau into the flank of the Austro-German forces. He did not withdraw the heavy artillery from the Banjšice Plateau, but demanded additional reinforcements, such as the Sassari Brigade, consisting of six Arditi battalions.

On 17 October Cadorna made the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps available to Capello, who deployed the corps along the line Matajur-Za Gradom Pass. Although this plan is not recorded, it is clear that Capello envisioned a mighty double embrace from the south and west.<sup>123</sup>

Cadorna finally realized that Capello was planning a major counter-offensive, contrary to the order issued on 18 September, so the commanding staff met on 19 October in Udine. Only then did Cadorna prohibit any offensive action. Capello left for Padua to be treated for acute nephritis on 20 October, and Cadorna's insistence on defence led the commanders of some of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army corps to begin organizing a defence. Capello did not follow Cadorna's instructions until 23 October; he only stopped considering a counter-offensive twelve hours before the beginning of the offensive, and ordered some units to occupy positions north of Tolmin. Many Italian units which were attacked on the morning of 24 October did not occupy their positions until the evening before the attack.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>124</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 300.



Even the commander of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, General Badoglio, had no advance notice of any major enemy movements or preparations. He strengthened the defences on Hlevnik and in the Kamnica Stream valley as a precaution, and was satisfied with the morale of soldiers and the material resources. Despite doubts about the possibility of breaking through the front, Cadorna issued an order to further strengthen the fortified line at the Tagliamento River, and the defence system at the Monte Grappa Ridge. The Italian king, accompanied by Cadorna, visited the main 3<sup>rd</sup> line of defence on the mountain of Stol on 22 October, where he was persuaded that the three lines of defence along the Soča River could not be broken. Based on the intelligence reports, the Italians expected an attack on the night of 22-23 October. On the same day, 23 October, at 1:00pm, after the obvious misinformation about the beginning of the attack, General Cavaciocchi got the information that the attack would begin on 24 October at 2:00am by tapping a telephone conversation. When Capello returned from hospital, he moved the headquarters from Cormons to Cividale del Friuli, and convened a meeting with the corps commanders. He ordered the commanders to respond immediately to the enemy's artillery preparations with a counter-preparation, and not to save any ammunition. The second meeting in the afternoon was also attended by Cadorna. Capello demanded additional reinforcements, and Cadorna accused him of disobeying the previous order. The corps commanders were very optimistic, and had no requests for reinforcements or any comments on the operational orders.<sup>125</sup>

The tension in the Italian trenches eased the day before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, as the highest level of readiness had been declared for 22 October. Although the Italians had accurate intelligence about the postponement of the date and time of the offensive, they did not want to believe the change, but thought it was a strategic deception. Moreover, they did not believe that the enemy would attack in such weather and at that time of year. The first lines of defence in the area of Volče were preventively emptied, and were now guarded by only a few troops of the Taro Brigade, while the rest were withdrawn to positions above the Volče Plain. Some guards were nonetheless

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<sup>125</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 187.

nervous, and fired when they heard a sound or noise from the direction of the enemy positions.<sup>126</sup>

We can thus summarize that the defensive positions in the area of penetration were occupied by units of the Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army: the 50<sup>th</sup>, 43<sup>rd</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> Divisions. The units of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps were arriving at their positions next. When the Italian units finally received the order to occupy their positions, it was too late. Only individual units occupied their areas of operation, while most were still at the rear.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 194.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 194.

# THE FIGHTING POWER OF THE GERMAN ARMY

## The components of fighting power

Every army has fighting power, which defines its ability to fight. It is a virtue with which one can defeat the enemy. When discussing fighting power, it should be emphasized that the concept does not only encompass the physical composition of units and their weapons. It consists of three interconnected parts: conceptual, moral and physical strength.<sup>128</sup>



*Components of fighting power*<sup>129</sup>

<sup>128</sup>B. Furlan et al.: *Vojaška doktrina*, Ljubljana 2006, p. 15; Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, p. 2. The military doctrine of the Slovenian Armed Forces defines the components of fighting power as the conceptual design (conceptual component), combat morale (moral component) and combat power (physical component).

<sup>129</sup>Taken from the military doctrine of Great Britain: Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*.

All three components of fighting power make up the core which enables the effective organization of combat forces. This chapter describes the influences and development of the German army's components before and during World War I, which directly affected the functioning and efficiency of the German units that fought in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive.

During World War I, the three warring parties on the Western Front – Germany, Great Britain and France – were quite similar in terms of their organizational structure, weapons and doctrine. Between 1914 and 1916, they sought new doctrinal solutions and began to develop new concepts, mainly in the fields of modern assault tactics, joint combat operations and mobile defence in depth. The German Army was the first of these countries' forces to make a transition in these areas. The British followed the development, with the French slightly behind.<sup>130</sup> All three countries had infantry, artillery, and cavalry branches. Infantry divisions numbered about 12,000 soldiers each. British divisions had a triangular structure in which each division had three brigades, and each brigade four battalions. The Germans and French had a square structure in which each division had two brigades, and each brigade two regiments, while each regiment numbered three battalions. All three armies had four companies in a battalion at the beginning of World War I. These numbered more than 200 soldiers and were the smallest units that could operate independently.<sup>131</sup> It should be emphasized that the Germans and French were very flexible in establishing the organizational structure of their units, and they formed battle groups and detachments within these units in accordance with the tasks at hand.

### ***The conceptual component***

The conceptual component is the conceptual design and the result of a thought process. It is defined by war principles, military doctrine and the development of military theory and practice. Principles and doctrine, combined with initiative and creativity, constitute the intellectual force of an army. This requires an understanding of conflicts.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War: The Organizational Sources of Doctrinal Change*, Princeton 2013, pp. 155-156.

<sup>131</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p. 156.

All the components of fighting power are equally important, but the fact is that the conceptual component is a priority, as it provides the foundations and guidelines for combat operation. At the heart of the conceptual component is a doctrine based on understanding the complexity of military conflict. The doctrine is the basis for education and training. It encourages thinking, focusing on how to think, rather than what to think.<sup>133</sup>

The Germans began to develop their conceptual component and doctrine as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To better understand the German Army's development of concepts and doctrine during World War I, we must examine the period at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder was Chief of the Prussian Supreme Staff. In 1866, after the Prussian victory in the war against the Austrians, he ordered studies to be prepared on the advantages and disadvantages of the Prussian Army, and the experience of war. The result of this study was the Instructions for Large Unit Commanders of 24 June 1869 (*Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869*). This document was the basis of German military theory for large unit operations, and was valid for the next seventy years. The document was supplemented in 1885, and reprinted with minor changes in 1910. It had a significant influence on the classic German military instructions on the commanding of units from 1933 (*Truppenführung*). According to experts, it was the most important document for understanding German military theory.

The British, French and German armies entered World War I unprepared, especially in the field of doctrines and concepts. The front lines slowly stabilized after the first engagements, and were strongly consolidated in 1915. The units that fortified themselves in fire trenches behind barbed wire entanglements under the protection of machine guns and artillery caused heavy losses to the units carrying out linear frontal attacks. All three countries wanted to solve a simple tactical problem – to occupy enemy trenches without unacceptable losses for the attacker. The year 1915 was more or less lost for the armies, and brought many casualties; there was no clear progress in doctrinal

<sup>132</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p.16.

<sup>133</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 2-3.

development. The first attempts at tactics appeared, but with no particular results on the battlefields.

The story which developed in the background of World War I, especially on the Western Front, had the characteristics of dynamic and constant change. On the one hand, the front lines did not change much; and on the other hand, there were major changes in the area of combat tactics. The period marked the beginning of the development of modern conventional warfare.<sup>134</sup> Development was fastest in the German Army, in which clear and visible changes began in 1916, especially in the areas of command culture and training structure. Changes in these two areas led to changes in the areas of mobile defence tactics, assault unit attacks, and joint combat operations. By developing the *auftragstaktik*<sup>135</sup> command culture, the Germans switched from partially centralized to partially decentralized command, which allowed subordinates to take the initiative, in accordance with the mission and intentions of their superiors. The process developed in the direction of complete centralization in the area of training; and the Germans published a manual for the training of infantry units in 1916 (*Ausbildungsvorschrift für die Fusstruppen im Kriege*). In the same year, they also began to successfully develop tactics for the operation of assault units and joint combat operations, especially infantry and artillery. Significant doctrinal changes took place in the German Army in 1917.<sup>136</sup> The Germans successfully demonstrated assault tactics and joint combat operations in various battlefields across Europe. All the innovations of the development of the previous two years were combined in a successful operation in October 1917 during the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive.

On the basis of this experience, the German Army had optimal military doctrine in March 1918. It was the first and only army in World War I to successfully adapt an assault attack, joint combat, and mobile defence in depth.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p. 158.

<sup>135</sup> Mission Command.

<sup>136</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p. 278.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

Doctrine and tactics' development of the German Army in World War I:<sup>138</sup>

GERMANY	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
Command culture	Partially centralized	Partially centralized	Partially de-centralized	Partially de-centralized	Partially de-centralized
Training structure	Partially centralized	Partially centralized	Centralized	Centralized	Centralized
Assault tactics	No	Attempts	Development	Demonstration on the battlefield	Yes
Joint combat	No	Attempts	Development	Demonstration on the battlefield	Yes

***The moral component***

The moral component of fighting power contains the least predictable aspect of conflict – the human element, which determines victory or defeat in battle. It gives the soldiers the will to fight.<sup>139</sup> Combat morale is created and maintained through motivation, values, leadership and management.<sup>140</sup>

The writings of Field Marshal Moltke the Elder clearly indicate the direction in which an army must focus its fighting power to achieve victory. “Victory alone breaks the will of the enemy, and forces him to submit to our will. Neither the possession of a tract of land nor the conquest of a fortified position will suffice. On the contrary, only the destruction (*Zerstörung*) of the enemy’s fighting power will, as a rule, be decisive. This [destruction of the enemy’s fighting power] is therefore the foremost object of operations (*Operationsobjekt*).”<sup>141</sup> With this statement, Moltke indicated how important the moral component of fighting power is.

In the discussion of the reasons for the success of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in the Upper Soča Region in October 1917, answers must also be sought here. It was not

<sup>138</sup> M. A. Hunzeker, *Perfecting War*, pp. 252-291.

<sup>139</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 2-11.

<sup>140</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p.17.

<sup>141</sup> D. J. Hughes: *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, North Carolina 1995, p. 176.

just a matter of conquering the geographical area, which was undoubtedly very important due to its diversity. This operation involved a much more complicated situation. The main objective of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was not to destroy or defeat the enemy in a physical sense. The manner in which the German Army operated in the Tolmin breakthrough had a much greater impact on the moral component of the Italian Army's fighting power, especially its cohesiveness and the will to continue the fight. The cohesion of units and the will to fight are paramount to achieving success in the complex and chaotic environment of conflict. Every army strives to maintain the cohesion and will of its units, while trying to break or reduce the cohesion and will of the enemy. This has been the central point or the goal of manoeuvre approach to warfare throughout history. Cohesion is the act or fact which creates a unified whole, and is the centre of effectiveness of combat units at all levels. On the other side there is the will that brings determination to persevere in solving hardships and problems. Will has two aspects: purpose and determination. Both can be influenced, attacked and threatened.<sup>142</sup>

The enemy's intent is thwarted when he realizes that his goal is no longer achievable, which results in the cessation of action. His determination is his willpower, and is defeated when he is demoralized. The armies which met in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive differed significantly in the moral component of fighting power. On one side were the German units (Austro-Hungarian units operated similarly) with a partially decentralized system of command, initiated by commanders at all levels, following the mission and intentions of their superiors – *auftragstaktik*. Throughout this period, the German units were the first to pay attention to the development and maintenance of the cohesion of units, placing importance on mutual communication and looking after subordinates.

In the book "Infantry Attacks" (*Infanterie greift an*), the then twenty-three-year-old Second Lieutenant Erwin Rommel describes the situation and the manner in which he took command of the 9<sup>th</sup> Company of the 124<sup>th</sup> Regiment in January 1915 on the Western Front. He particularly emphasized self-discipline, caring for subordinates, and living with them in equal conditions.

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<sup>142</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 2-3.



He concluded his thoughts with the sentence: “But once he (the commander) has their confidence, his men will follow him through hell and high water.”<sup>143</sup>

Another example of the commander’s unwavering connection to his unit occurred a few months later. In May 1915, the 9<sup>th</sup> Company of the 124<sup>th</sup> Regiment was taken over by a first lieutenant who held a higher rank than Rommel. The regiment commander wanted to assign Rommel to another company in the same regiment. Rommel, however, asked to remain in the 9<sup>th</sup> Company, and took a lower post as platoon commander.<sup>144</sup> Although this move was unusual, it is an eloquent example of his awareness of the importance of interconnectedness.

When the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was formed in 1915, the first objectives of the battalion commander, Major Sprösser, (in addition to establishing an organizational structure and providing equipment) were effectiveness and morale.<sup>145</sup> The motto of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, “Fearlessness and Loyalty”<sup>146</sup>, clearly emphasized the values which were an important part of the moral component of fighting power. This paid off a good two years later in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, when his troops followed their commanders exactly as Second Lieutenant Rommel had predicted: in fog and rain (through hell and high water) on the demanding mountainous terrain.

The Bavarian Infantry Regiment (Leib Regiment), which fought together with the Württemberg Mountain Battalion near Tolmin, paid special attention to the cohesion of units by deploying and developing important officers. The Regiment’s Third Battalion was an elite assault unit led by Major Robert Bothmer from January 1917 to September 1918. Major Bothmer temporarily took command of the entire Leib Regiment during the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. The commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion’s 12<sup>th</sup> Company, which conquered Hill 1114 on 24 October 1917, was Second Lieutenant Schörner, who commanded the

<sup>143</sup> E. Rommel: *Infanterie greift an*, Einbeck 2015, p. 59.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>145</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 20.

<sup>146</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 42.

12<sup>th</sup> Company from November 1916 to September 1918.<sup>147</sup> This way of staffing ensured stability and enabled the development of cohesion and mutual trust.

On the other side were the Italian units with a centralized system of command, in which initiative was not defined as part of military doctrine, and communication was mostly one-way. Discipline was based on the fear of punishment, and as a result, the Supreme Command of the Italian Army did not have a true and clear picture of the military power of its units. This is also evident from General Cadorna's telegraphic message to the units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army on the Soča battlefield on the first day of the offensive, on 24 October 1917.

“The great enemy offensive has begun. The Supreme Command puts its trust in the heroic spirit of all commanders, officers and men who know how to ‘win or die’. But the Second Army officers do not know how to win, and the men do not want to die.”<sup>148</sup> In addition, the morale of some units was very low. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's conference on 19 September 1917 pointed out that the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps was not in the best condition: strategically, tactically or morally.<sup>149</sup>

The German tactics of operation and targeting had a decisive influence on the cohesion of the Italian units, which were morally weak even before the offensive. Mass surrenders were the result of a complete loss of will to continue the fight. These were all reasons for the success of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and the rapid disintegration of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army.

### ***The physical component***

The physical component of fighting power is the combat strength of any army. It comprises all the forces and resources for warfighting, and is the quantitative and qualitative indicator of physical strength and a unit's effectiveness. It is the total means of destructive power which a unit or formation can launch against an opponent at any given time.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> R. von Reiss (et al.): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment im Weltkrieg, Anlage 6*.

<sup>148</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 307.

<sup>149</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 74.

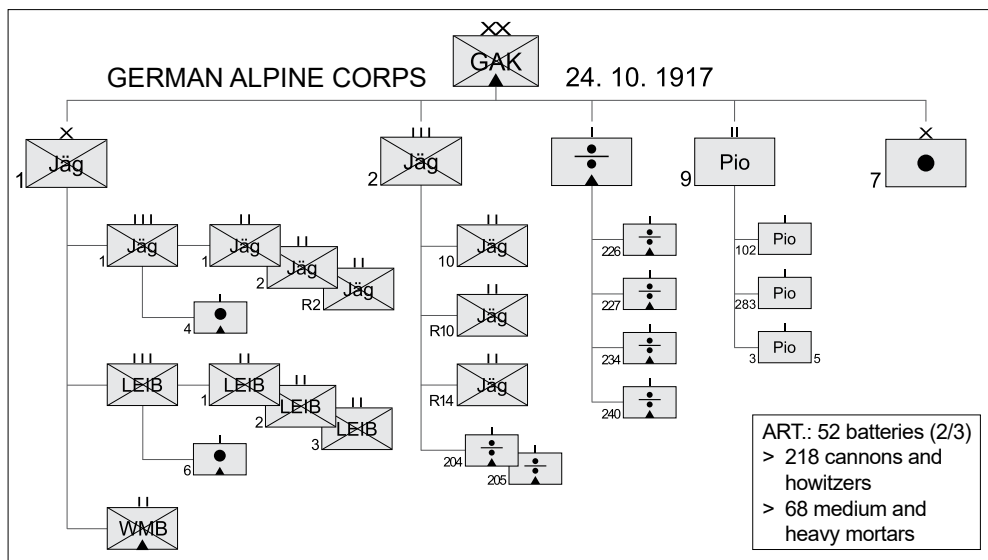
<sup>150</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p. 21.

During World War I, the development of assault unit tactics in the German Army brought many changes in the areas of tactics, command, weapons, fire support, and the organizational and formation structure of infantry units. The physical component of the German Alpine Corps' fighting power will be presented in more detail to facilitate the understanding of structure, weapons and firepower. The Corps was formed in May 1915 in Bavaria, and was considered an elite mountain combat unit of the German Army. Although the unit was formed during the war, it gained much combat experience during the two years of fighting in the area which stretched from the Dolomites across Serbia to Romania.

The greatest virtue of the German Alpine Corps was its ability to operate and fight independently, and move rapidly on demanding terrain. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the German Alpine Corps was at the centre of operations, stretching from Tolmin across Kolovrat to Matajur, and then towards Cividale del Friuli; for this reason it was greatly strengthened, especially its fire support capabilities. The core of the Corps' combat part was the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Brigade, which included two jäger regiments, the Bavarian Leib Regiment and, from 12 October to 4 November 1917, also the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. During the offensive, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment was subordinated directly to the German Alpine Corps Command as a reserve. The Pioneer Battalion Command, which included two companies, was joined by the third pioneer company from the 5<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Battalion (combat engineers).

The Alpine Corps was also reinforced with machine guns and artillery during the offensive. A machine gun detachment with four companies was added to the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade's Mountain Detachment with two companies, under the direct command of the German Alpine Corps. Its firepower was thus greatly increased. The Mountain Battalion acquired another thirty-six machine guns in addition to those in combat battalions.

The artillery was significantly strengthened by cannons, howitzers and mortars of various types and calibres. There were as many as 52 artillery batteries under the command of Bavarian Lieutenant Colonel Herold.



Organization and formation structure of the German Alpine Corps with additional units in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive<sup>151</sup> (Source: M. Kuhar)

An important innovation in 1916-1917 was the strengthening of firepower in assault battalions with machine guns and light machine guns. Infantry, jäger and mountain units had had machine guns and light mortars in their composition since the beginning of World War I; these provided direct fire support in both defensive and offensive operations. Standard weapons included the MG-08 machine gun and the MG-08/15.

The standard German MG-08<sup>152</sup> machine gun weighed as much as 69 kilograms (65 kilograms without cooling water). The machine gun consisted of two separate parts: a machine gun weighing 24.5 kilograms, and a tripod weighing 38.5 kilograms. It had an effective range of 2000 metres, and a maximum range of 3000 metres. Pack animals were mostly used for carrying. The soldiers carried the machine guns themselves during the combat, which required much strength and physical effort.

<sup>151</sup> R. Kaltenecker: *Das Deutsche Alpenkorps im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Graz – Stuttgart Stocker 1995, pp. 208-209.

<sup>152</sup> Ger. Maschinengewehr 08.

In 1915, the Germans developed a light machine gun version MG-08/15. The basis was the original MG-08 model, to which a bipod and a wooden rifle butt were added. It weighed a total of 20.8 kilograms (17.8 kilograms without cooling water). Its effective range was close to 500 metres. The essential innovation and advantage of the light machine gun was its lower weight and mobility, which enabled the attacking units to move at a higher speed, and ensured rapid direct fire support at the height of the attack. The Germans began to introduce light machine guns into units en masse in 1917. The units of the German Alpine Corps were only equipped with them about a month before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive.

The same 7.92x57 calibre Mauser ammunition was used for the MG-08 machine gun and the MG-08/15 light machine gun. This had a great practical advantage in supplying the units on the battlefield. The 250-round ammunition belts were used for MG-08, and 100 and 200 round belts and ammunition drums for MG-08/15.

If we compare the formation structure of German infantry units at the beginning of World War I and in 1917, we see a significant difference in the number of machine guns and light machine guns. The units followed a fundamental idea which was paramount to success in penetration tactics – ensuring fire superiority over the enemy. The formation structure and armaments of the Leib Regiment and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive will be presented in more detail later.

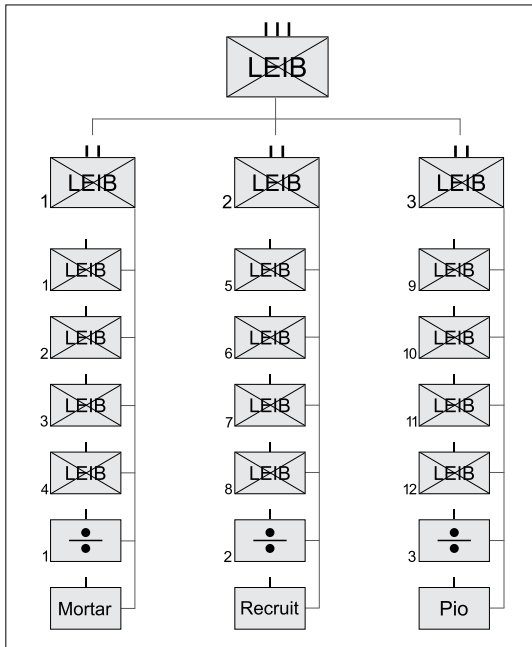
## **The Royal Bavarian Infantry Lifeguards Regiment (Leib Regiment)**

The Bavarian Lifeguards Regiment (Leib) was a unit with a tradition dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In peacetime, the regiment carried out protocol tasks as the personal guard of the King of Bavaria. The regiment's officer corps was mostly taken from high Bavarian circles. Although it was not a mountain unit, the regiment was part of the German Alpine Corps. Its members mastered a

lot of knowledge and skills, including fighting on demanding terrain and in winter. The regiment had experience in the Dolomites, fighting in trenches of the Western Front, where it carried out several limited penetration attacks at Verdun, and mastered the tactics of assault groups.<sup>153</sup> It also had experience in manoeuvre warfare, especially from Romania and Serbia. Despite the officers being mainly of aristocratic descent, the unit was designated to participate in the height of the attack of the German Alpine Corps near Tolmin.

On 23 October 1917<sup>154</sup> the Leib Regiment was composed of three battalions, each of which included four infantry companies and a machine gun company. In addition, the first battalion included a mortar company, the second a recruit company, and the third a pioneer company. In 1917, the Regiment commander was a lieutenant colonel, the commanders of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> battalions were captains, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion was a major, and the company commanders were second and first lieutenants. Major Robert Bothmer, who was otherwise commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, temporarily took command of

the Regiment during the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. The Regiment's third battalion was considered elite and best trained, and the first battalion was in reserve. Mortar and recruit companies did not take part in the first phase of the attack, which extended across the mountain of Kolovrat towards Cividale del Friuli.

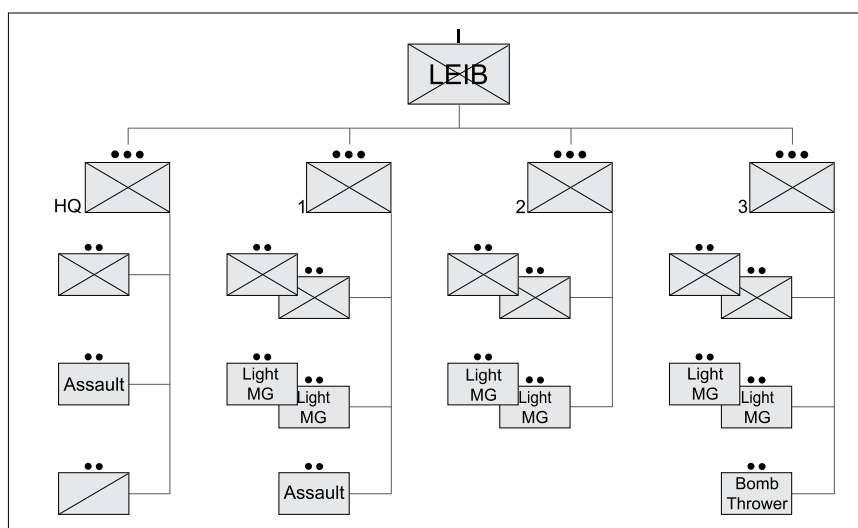


Organization and formation structure of the Leib Regiment in October 1917 (Source: M. Kuhar)

<sup>153</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918*, Westport USA 1995, p. 131.

<sup>154</sup> R. von Reiss (et al.): *Das Königlich Bayerische Infanterie-Leibregiment im Weltkrieg*, pp. 64-65.

The infantry company included a command platoon and three infantry platoons. In addition to the command squad, the command platoon included an assault and a reconnaissance squad. All three infantry platoons included two infantry squads and two light machine gun squads. This means that each company had six light machine guns; the battalion had twenty-four; and the regiment a total of seventy-two. The first platoon was reinforced with an assault squad, and the third with a grenade launcher squad.<sup>155</sup> The three machine gun companies had eight machine guns each, which makes a total of twenty-four MG-08 machine guns.



*Organization and formation structure of the Leib Regiment's assault company*  
(Source: M. Kuhar)

## The Württemberg Mountain Battalion

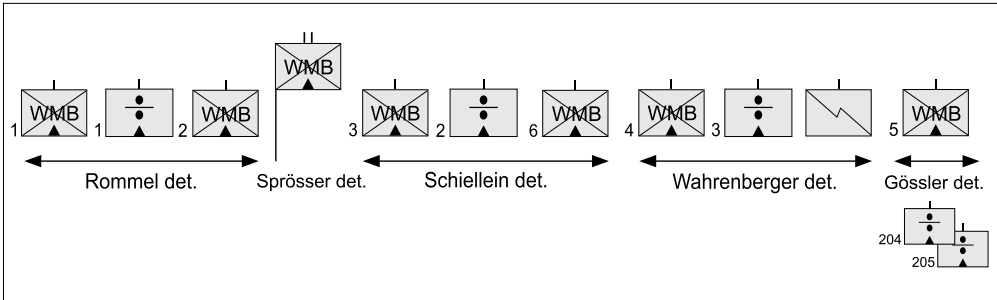
In contrast to the Leib Regiment, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was a young unit formed in October 1915. Its predecessor was a ski company, which was renamed a mountain company in May 1915, and included in the battalion in October. The main idea behind the formation of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was that each of the six mountain companies would be

<sup>155</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 101.

able to operate independently with the support of one of its three machine gun companies. Command of the battalion was taken over by an experienced officer, Major Theodor Sprösser, who also commanded the battalion in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive at the age of forty-eight.<sup>156</sup>

On 24 October 1917, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion included a battalion headquarters, six mountain companies, and three machine gun companies. Added to this were two small detachment headquarters and a signals company. The battalion was reinforced with a mortar and training company, but these remained in Villach and did not join the battalion in the Offensive.<sup>157</sup> In the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the battalion commander commanded ten companies. This is very demanding, especially if the units operate in separate directions, so Major Sprösser formed three detachments<sup>158</sup> within the battalion which were able to operate independently.

The detachment commanders included First Lieutenant Rommel. The battalion commander adjusted the size of the detachments to the situation and task. There are ambiguities in many publications due to a mistranslation of the original German word *Abteilung*. This is the reason why Rommel is listed as the commander of a company, group, squad, and even a battalion.



*The battle formation in the initial phase of the Kobarid breakthrough, which shows three detachments commanded by the battalion commander. The 5<sup>th</sup> Mountain Company, together with the 204<sup>th</sup> and 205<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Detachments, was deployed in the area of Tolmin Castle (Kozlov rob). It supported units in the first phase of the breakthrough.<sup>159</sup>*

<sup>156</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>157</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 346.

<sup>158</sup> Ger. Abteilung.

<sup>159</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, annex no. 38.



The formation of detachments within the battalion had a great advantage, as the battalion was able to operate on a decentralized basis in several independent directions. Such a concept only worked if it was led by trained officers who understood and had mastered the principle of mission command (*auftragstaktik*). The Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the Leib Regiment both emphasized the provision of firepower. The three machine gun companies had a total of eighteen MG-08 machine guns, and the six infantry companies had thirty-six MG-08/15 light machine guns. This was enough for heavy fire and local superiority over the enemy. The Italian battalion included fourteen light machine guns<sup>160</sup>, which meant that the German side was almost three times its superior.

Although the units of the German Alpine Corps were only equipped with light machine guns about a month before the beginning of the offensive, they were able to make excellent use of them in the attack. Light machine guns and machine guns were a great combination. Light machine guns were highly mobile, and machine guns were used over long distances by units with direct support.

The artillery provided the greatest possible support to the assault units in the immediate vicinity of the enemy, with various calibres and excellent echeloning of fire.

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<sup>160</sup>P. Gaspari: *La verità*, p. 29.

# THE GERMAN STYLE OF COMMAND AND CONTROL – AUFTRAGSTAKTIK

## The development and significance of the concept of *Auftragstaktik*

The principle of command and control is one of the most important combat functions, and enables organized and coordinated combat of units at all levels. Command is based on timely decision-making, a clear understanding of the superior's intent, the ability of subordinates to implement the intent, and the commander's ability to communicate the plan's implementation from beginning to end.<sup>161</sup>

The Prussian army began to develop the concept of command and control in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The concept was named *auftragstaktik* at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has survived in the German Army to this day. It was also taken over by many other countries, including the Slovenian Armed Forces, which translated it as *poveljevanje s poslanstvom* (*mission command*). The basic principles of this unique concept have not changed significantly, so let us first look at the four modern definitions that most clearly express the meaning of this word. The German unit command manual contains the following definition: “*Auftragstaktik* is the pre-eminent command and control principle in the Army. It is based on mutual trust and requires each soldier's unwavering commitment to perform his duty. The military leader informs what his intention is, sets clear achievable objectives, and provides the required forces and resources.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p. 63.

<sup>162</sup> W. Widder: *German Army, Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung*, Fort Leavenworth, September-October 2002, p. 3.

In the English-speaking world, *auftragstaktik* was translated to *mission command*. The U.S. Army's doctrine states that *mission command* is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders for the conduct of joint land operations.<sup>163</sup>

To ensure a broader understanding, let us add the definition of the British Army, which describes *mission command* as a philosophy of command with centralized intent and decentralized execution, which is particularly suitable for complex, dynamic and conflicting situations.<sup>164</sup> The mission command approach encourages decentralized command, freedom and speed of operations and initiative, as well as consistent compliance with the directions and instructions of the superior commander.<sup>165</sup>

The idea of the concept of *auftragstaktik* has a long historical development, with beginnings in Prussia and Germany. It took a century for the idea to reach its final framework and content. Experts place the beginnings of the idea in 1806, after the defeat of the Prussians against Napoleon in Jena. At that time, two conclusions were drawn which were important foundations for future development. It was established that the key commanders on the battlefield were informed too late about what was happening there due to the chaos and "fog of war". Another important realization was that only the commanders directly on the battlefield had a clear picture of what was really taking place. This was the basis for the development of a new concept, including some starting points or proposals:

- The commanders on the battlefield must respond quickly and in real time;
- They must take the initiative without prior consultation with their superiors;
- They must seize the opportunity and respond to unfavourable situations in a timely manner.

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<sup>163</sup> US Army Headquarters: *Army Doctrine Publication 6-0 Mission Command*, Washington, 2012.

<sup>164</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 6-11.

<sup>165</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p. 63.

One of the most important generals who perceived the need for change was Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, Chief of the Supreme Staff of the Prussian Army in 1857-1888. He is considered the founder and creator of the command and control concept at the operational level, and the concept of *auftragstaktik*, although he never used this term himself. Moltke used two terms: order (*Befehl*) at the tactical level, and directive (*Direktive*) at the operational level. He substantiated the main principle that subordinates operate within the guidelines and intentions of their superiors, and “/.../ that the commanders they serve would be able to act according to the intent of a higher commander even without orders.”<sup>166</sup>

The term *auftragstaktik* was introduced in 1906 by the German General Otto von Moser in the “Training and Control of the Battalion in Combat” manual and in the “Manual of Infantry Training for War”. Since then, it has been a valid term for the principle of command and control.<sup>167</sup>

The high German commanders limited the independence of subordinate commanders with the establishment of fortified front lines on the Western Front at the beginning of World War I, and the development of the *auftragstaktik* concept was halted for more than two years. The initiative was revived in 1916 and 1917, along with the development of a mobile defence in depth and penetration tactics. The condition for this method of operation was a high level of initiative and creativity at all levels, from the highest ranking officers to non-commissioned officers at platoon level, and the commanders of assault squads and groups. Junior officers and non-commissioned officers were forced to act and take decisions in the absence of their superiors in direct combat, according to the situation at the time.<sup>168</sup>

Moltke the Elder justified this approach by the fact that the commanders actually involved in a battle had a better understanding of the situation. They therefore required no precise or long orders, but guidance in the sense of a directive, because even after the first contact, the situation begins to change.

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<sup>166</sup> W. Widder: *German Army*, p. 3.

<sup>167</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. X-34.

<sup>168</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. X-34.

The basic elements of the *auftragstaktik* concept are the mission, situation, commander's intent, freedom of action, and initiative.<sup>169</sup>

*The mission and the situation* are the most important factors in making a decision. A mission is a clear and concise statement specifying to an individual or a unit who will lead the operation, what needs to be done, when it will happen, and why it is being carried out. It does not specify *how* it will be conducted. This question must be answered by subordinate commanders. It is important that the commander is able to clearly, logically and simply understand the situation, and that he knows how to direct his thought processes to what is essential. The German Army believed that there was no need to wait for all the information and to strive for the best possible decision; its members were convinced that for a commander to achieve success on the battlefield, it was enough to choose the second or third option of action.<sup>170</sup>

In the mission command approach, subordinate commanders are required to evaluate all the planned activities in accordance with the commander's intent.

The *intent* is a clear and concise statement of the purpose of an operation, and describes the desired end state which supports the mission. The intent answers the question of why something must be done. The commander's intent promotes unity of effort and enables the units to pursue a common objective or the same end state. A well-expressed intent encourages subordinates to take the initiative, and is a source of motivation. The commander always assesses and thinks analytically within the area of responsibility determined by the intent.

The next important element of the *auftragstaktik* is *freedom of action*. A superior should provide his subordinates with sufficient freedom of action. In doing so, each commander must be willing to accept responsibility to exercise freedom of action in accordance with the order. This was clearly stated in the Austro-Hungarian orders for the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. The first point of the 55<sup>th</sup> Division's order to attack said: "This strong desire to advance must

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. X-35.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. X-36.

permeate all, commanders and soldiers alike, and must, given that victory is on the side of the bold and the brave, lead to success.”<sup>171</sup>

Freedom of action is limited by the commander’s intent on the one hand, and sufficient reserve forces on the other. This was evident in the deployment of forces for the attack in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. The assault squads were followed by very strong units in terms of their numbers, weapons, and strongly reinforced reserve units. Such combat deployment in depth allowed for freedom of action.

Rommel took advantage of his freedom of action several times on Hlevnik and Kolovrat. On the Ridge of Hlevnik, he actually entered the area of operation of the Leib Regiment. He moved into the height of the attack in the direction of Kuk on 25 October, even though it was the Leib Regiment that was originally assigned to this task. The roadblock on the Livek-Savogna road, and the penetration in the direction of Jevšček and Monte Craguenza<sup>172</sup> were also not foreseen in the original attack order. Quite the opposite. The original order stipulated that the Württemberg Mountain Battalion would secure the right flank of the Leib Regiment, and occupy artillery positions in the village of Foni. However, all these moves of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion must also be understood in the light of the tactics of combined penetration in several directions. A penetration in one direction can allow the penetration to also continue in other directions.

The infiltration of Rommel’s detachment on Kolovrat took place in this context. A comparative analysis of orders and reports shows that Rommel followed the command and intent of his superior all the way from Tolmin to the top of Matajur in that “/... / he constantly advanced to the west, not limited in space and time by daily objectives, knowing he had strong reserves behind him.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> L. Galič: *Od Krna do Rombona 1915-1917*, p. 164.

<sup>172</sup> Rommel, and many other authors summarizing Rommel, describe the battle of the Rommel detachment for Monte Craguenza, which, however, was not a battle for this peak, but the one before Monte Craguenza, called Breza (1094m). Nevertheless, we decided to keep Rommel’s name in order to make it easier to trace the progress of the Rommel detachment. Source: Topographic map of Slovenia 1: 25,000, Sheet No. 088 Kobarid, Surveying and Mapping Authority of the RS, 1997.

<sup>173</sup> E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, Kobarid 1997, p. 17.

The third element of the *auftragstaktik* concept is *initiative*. Initiative is important in order to prevent surprise or unexpected events.<sup>174</sup> It by no means signifies arbitrariness. The decision-making commander must act within the assigned mission and his commander's intent. Initiative is crucial for independent operation, and is most important in the development of the *auftragstaktik* concept in the Prussian and German Armies. The concept of *auftragstaktik* began with the idea of decentralized command, which was based on the fact that soldiers, although not under direct control, act independently within their commander's intent.<sup>175</sup> Moltke particularly emphasized the importance of initiative in his writings. "Numerous are the situations in which an officer must act according to his own judgment. It would be a serious mistake for him to wait for orders in moments when orders often cannot be given."<sup>176</sup>

There are three categories of initiative in military theory.<sup>177</sup> The first category is quite clear and understandable. A commander judges and decides within the intent of his superior, and does not deviate from it. The only condition for this is that the commander is very familiar with the doctrine and understands his superior's intent. In doing so, he does not question the objectives, but answers the question of how to perform the assigned task.

The second category of initiative refers to times when the situation on the battlefield has changed so much that it is no longer possible to operate in accordance within the original intent of the superior. The commander on the battlefield may then decide to act on his own judgment and in line with the new circumstances. However, there are two additional conditions. This can only be done if the commander has no contact with his superior at critical moments. In addition, he must inform his superior of his decision as soon as possible.

This type of initiative includes Rommel's decision to continue the attack on 26 October in the direction of Mrzli vrh (1356m)-Hill 1467-Matajur (1641m).

<sup>174</sup> M. Sonnenberger: *Initiative Within the Philosophy of Auftragstaktik*, Kansas, Munich, Germany 2013, p. 7.

<sup>175</sup> M. Sonnenberger: *Initiative*, p. 2.

<sup>176</sup> D. J. Hughes: *Moltke*, p. 177.

<sup>177</sup> M. Sonnenberger: *Initiative*, pp. 7-9.

Rommel's superior, Major Sprösser, during the preparations for attack on the pre-summit of Matajur, clearly ordered Rommel that: "The Württemberg Mountain Battalion withdraws."<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, Rommel continued the attack, and justified his decision by the fact that the battalion command was issued without knowing the real situation on the southern slopes of Matajur. According to Rommel, the many Italian prisoners of war (over 3200) who came to Monte Craguenza gave Major Sprösser the impression that the fighting on Matajur was over.

The third category develops when the situation within the unit has changed so much that the execution of the commander's intent is no longer possible. This usually involves heavy losses in the team or material assets, when the unit is no longer capable of fighting. In 1869, Moltke wrote in the Instructions that: "/.../ each commander must act in accordance with his own judgment and instinct rather than waiting for orders." He added the caveat that the subordinate's actions should support the higher commander's vision when possible.<sup>179</sup> A commander must be able to balance risk, initiative, and caution.

## **Advantages and disadvantages of the *Auftragstaktik* concept**

The *auftragstaktik* command concept is a unique phenomenon, as it has been relevant for more than two hundred years. One of the greatest strengths of this concept is encouraging commanders at all levels to be creative and proactive. This creates the conditions for progress and proactive action, and enables the forces in military conflicts to be one step ahead of the enemy, and achieve victory. If the concept is properly directed, it has a positive effect on motivation and consequently on the moral component of fighting power. A telling example is Rommel's action on the night of 24–25 October 1917 on Hill 1066, as he considered the possibilities of continuing the attack. In doing so, he was well aware of what a disciplined initiative meant. Before taking action, he waited for Major Sprösser to arrive, introduced him to the idea of

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<sup>178</sup> E. Rommel: *Infantry Attacks*, Barnsley 2013, p. 223.

<sup>179</sup> M. J. Gunther: *Auftragstaktik: The Basis for Modern Military Command*, Forth Leavenworth, Kansas 2012, p. 10.



a penetration manoeuvre in a quieter sector to the west, and asked him for forces and the approval of the plan. Major Sprösser supported his initiative even at the cost of a dispute with the Leib Regiment commander, but assigned him two companies less than Rommel had requested. At the same time, he promised to support him with the entire Württemberg Mountain Battalion if the breakthrough was successful, which later actually happened. Such a way of operating is only possible in an environment of mutual trust and a culture of proactive action. Rommel could quite legitimately have waited defensively for the arrival of the battalion commander and for a new command.

The concept of *auftragstaktik* also has its shortcomings, which can hinder the command and control of units. There can be several risk factors: poor interpersonal relationships and lack of trust, personal rivalry and unhealthy prestige, personal weaknesses, and incompetence of individual commanders. Rivalry between units and prestige could have been the cause of the mutual disagreement over the concept of continuing the attack of the Leib Regiment and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on Hill 1114 on the night of 25 October. The Leib Regiment's commander repelled the counterattacks of the Italian units on Hill 1114 with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, while the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions were only just arriving on the scene. He wanted to direct the battalion to the south-east (Bukova Ježa, 958m) with the aim of opening the passage for the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment, which was halted on its left wing. The Leib Regiment's commander ordered Rommel and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion to take over the defence of Hill 1114, and then follow the Leib Regiment in the attack on the mountain of Kuk. In a conversation with Major Bothmer, Major Sprösser estimated that the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, with ten companies, had enough forces to independently continue the attack to the west, with the next objective of reaching Kuk. After this conversation, Major Bothmer headed south-east, and Major Sprösser headed west. In a biography of Ferdinand Schörner, this event ends with the thought: "They did not part as good friends but as fierce competitors."<sup>180</sup> We must be aware that the Leib Regiment's commander did not have the authority to command the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. Both were subordinate to the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger

<sup>180</sup>R. Kaltenege: *Generalfeldmarschal Ferdinand Schörner*, Teil 1, Würzburg 2014, p. 101.

Brigade within the German Alpine Corps. Bothmer and Sprösser were both majors, but Sprösser was senior in rank. Major Sprösser was promoted to the rank of major on 19 August 1914, and Major Bothmer almost three years later.

The question arises as to which of the commanders was right and made the right decision. Tactically, they both made the right decision. To successfully continue the penetration in accordance with the order of the German Alpine Corps on the Kolovrat Ridge, it was important to ensure two conditions at that moment: to hold the momentum, and to continue the attack at the same pace as on the first day, while providing enough forces to support the height of the attack. The Leib Regiment commander rightly thought that his current priority was to maintain the positions reached on Hill 1114, and to unblock the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment, which would strengthen the forces to continue the attack towards the west. The Württemberg Mountain Battalion commander, however, estimated that he had enough forces to continue the attack to the west.

In this way, he would open a new possibility of penetration on Kolovrat, and continue with the temporarily suspended pace of the attack, relieving the pressure of the Italians on the Leib Regiment. By making this decision, he was formally still on the right flank of the Leib Regiment, as defined in the order, and acted in accordance with the intent of the German Alpine Corps Commander.

### **Conditions for the success of the *Auftragstaktik* concept**

The concept of *auftragstaktik* is not merely a command and control tool for superiors to express their intention, and subordinates to get answers on how to perform their tasks. Certain conditions must be met for the concept to work. The first is the selection of a competent commander who understands the nature of conflict, masters the doctrine, is a top leader, and has a high level of qualification, experience and education. The Germans were convinced that waging war was more of an art in a technical sense than a science. A commander must be able to think and use logic, because war is a complex

event in which many events and happenings are unpredictable. A commander must be capable of making decisions independently, quickly and efficiently, even in the absence of information. In addition, he must have a sufficiently developed intuition to make decisions quickly when there is not enough time to analyze the situation. The condition for well-developed intuition is knowledge-related experience.

In addition to professional competencies, good interpersonal relationships are also important for the *auftragstaktik* concept to work. The foundation of good interpersonal relationships in the German army was trust, which stemmed from mutual respect. The superiors trusted their subordinates, and let them make independent decisions. The subordinates trusted their superiors to provide them with the conditions and to support their operations. Even today, in leadership theory, mutual trust encourages communication and cooperation. This increases unit satisfaction and management efficiency. As a result, the culture of teamwork is strengthened, and the unit becomes successful and stable. The parish priest from Sora describes in his chronicle from 1917 his observations of the relationships in the German army units when members were leaving for the Upper Soča Region. “The relationship between officers and ordinary soldiers is more domestic than in the Austro-Hungarian Army. The officers are polite. There is strong troop discipline. The officers often eat with the soldiers.”<sup>181</sup> The interrelationships and the joint sharing of all burdens was also observed in the records of First Lieutenant Rommel, who marched and fought together with his detachment. This is how he described his march towards Tolmin: “I myself marched at the head of a long column of squad staff.”<sup>182</sup>

The *auftragstaktik* concept of leadership, command and control is important in high-intensity combat, in which the conditions change rapidly, and commanders must respond to these changes immediately. This command concept was almost ideal in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, because the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units were deployed in a very non-linear manner, and were scattered on

<sup>181</sup>N. B. Kodrič: Prva svetovna vojna iz župnijskih kronik leto 1917, *Loški razgledi*, No. 44, 1998, pp. 97-98.

<sup>182</sup>E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, p. 10.

separate battlefields. This approach had a significant impact on the success of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's breakthrough. Prior to the breakthrough, units at all levels were given clear objectives and intent by their superiors. The *auftragstaktik* culture encouraged the commanders to make independent decisions, and to find tactical solutions which were not and could not be planned in advance.

The concept of mission command is also the art of balancing unity of effort and freedom of action, with trust and mutual understanding being vital for timely and effective decision-making.<sup>183</sup>

In the concept of *auftragstaktik*, trust is also related to the self-confidence of superiors and the courage and motivation of their subordinates.<sup>184</sup>

In connection to this, we can shed light on two key events of the Rommel detachment's penetration, in which these qualities had a significant impact on success. The infiltration on the Kolovrat Ridge on the morning of 25 October could have ended completely differently. After having invaded the Italian third line of defence, the Rommel detachment, with two infantry companies and one machine gun company, operated independently for nearly two hours. The other units of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were, at the most critical moments, a good two kilometres away, on Hill 1066, which was quite unusual and even contrary to deep penetration tactics. Meanwhile, Rommel fought with strong Italian forces on Kolovrat, and was further threatened by the Italian artillery from the mountain of Hum. Moreover, he did not have a clear picture of the formation and strength of the Italian forces. Mutual trust, self-confidence, courage, and motivation were important qualities of the commanders and members of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion units in those critical moments. Another key moment was the battle for Monte Craguenza, which was tactically very risky for Rommel's detachment, as it had no strong reserves or artillery support. Rommel was in a rather unfavourable position at the beginning of the attack, as he had strong Italian forces on the Ridge above him who were also infiltrated among his detachment above Jevšček. Fortunately for him, the Italians were not aware of their tactical

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<sup>183</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 6-11.

<sup>184</sup> H. J. Stark: *Auftragstaktik is a Key Element for Success in Peace and War Times*, Washington 2008, p. 13.

advantage at critical moments, and Rommel managed to avoid the critical situation with audacity and relentlessness.

The final important condition for the functioning of *auftragstaktik* is an appropriate relationship between centralization and decentralization. The effectiveness of the *auftragstaktik* concept is ensured by centralized doctrine and planning, partially centralized training, and moderately decentralized command. This is the right balance that, on the one hand, creates unity of effort, and on the other allows commanders to express their knowledge and experience through initiative. It is probably also the answer to the question of why German officers in World War I put more emphasis on education than on training. Subordinates were taught how to think, and not what to think. Such an approach directed individuals to take up an active role and operate independently.

## DEVELOPMENT OF PENETRATION TACTICS

At the beginning of World War I, none of the warring parties on the Western Front – the British, the French, and the Germans – had effective infantry tactics for smaller units, especially not in offensive operations. Before the war, there were studies that predicted how a future war would be carried out on the battlefield, but the military and political leaders of the countries did not pay much attention to such studies.<sup>185</sup> The front lines became increasingly fortified with barbed wire entanglements and pillboxes, and defended with machine guns which easily covered the area in front of the fire trenches. The tactic was based on firepower, so linear formations of riflemen had very little chance of a breakthrough and penetration. Assaults were mostly halted before or in between the barbed wire entanglements due to many casualties. Even if invasions of enemy positions occurred, it was difficult to clear the trenches, as the main defence of soldiers was the rifle and the bayonet. The tactical problem was clear and simple. The question had to be answered of how to occupy the enemy trenches without unacceptable losses for the attacker. The idea of penetrating through the enemy's line of defence in a scattered formation deep into the enemy's defence system with the support of artillery began to develop directly on the front line. The idea appeared in all three armies on the Western Front, but the Germans were most effective in its realization.

Penetration<sup>186</sup> through the enemy's defence lines into the depths of their battle formation in several places at the same time was one form of manoeuvre and

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<sup>185</sup>In a 1908 study *Die Schlacht*, the Austro-Hungarian officer Maximillian Csicseric von Bascany advocated an offensive doctrine. At the same time, he predicted that a future war would be trench-based and positional. He suggested night attacks, stressed the importance of smaller units supported by light machine guns, and defended the basics of infiltration tactics, which some armies only introduced towards the end of the war.

<sup>186</sup>German: Durchbruch, durchbrechen.

an innovation of German tactics in 1916-1917 in response to increasingly fortified and defended enemy positions.

Before we begin to discuss the tactics, let us look at the main concepts in this context: penetration, breakthrough, and infiltration. The terms have different meanings, although they are seemingly similar and often appear as terms for the same activity in professional literature.

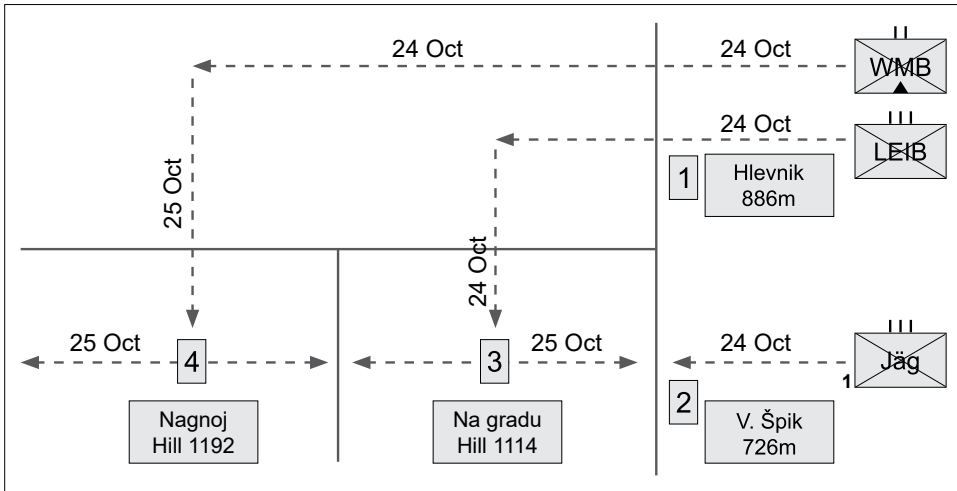
The Dictionary of Slovene Literary Language (SSKJ) clearly defines the difference in the meaning of these terms. The verb 'to penetrate' in the military sense means "to enter enemy territory with military force and combat". A breakthrough is defined as "a military action in which a group of soldiers fights through the enemy positions". For infiltration, SSKJ uses the adjective 'covert' and describes it as "sneaking, intrusion".

Penetration is a form of attack aimed at breaking through defensive positions and disrupting the defence system.<sup>187</sup>

Penetration in military tactics means a method of attack in which the attacker attempts to reach the enemy positions in the depths of his battle formation in one narrow direction or in several narrow directions simultaneously. The attacker tries to find or create weak points in the enemy's defence system before the penetration, and in principle avoids heavily fortified areas. The main idea of penetration is to reach the depth of the enemy's battle formation in the shortest possible time, preferably without a fight. The critical part of the penetration manoeuvre is the protection of one's own forces, which the attackers achieve with the highest possible speed of penetration. This was and still is one of the fundamental forms of infantry manoeuvre. The theory of military tactics distinguishes between three types of penetration: deep penetration, multidirectional penetration, and combined penetration.<sup>188</sup>

<sup>187</sup> B. Furlan: *Bojno delovanje*, notes, Ljubljana 2006, p. 89.

<sup>188</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 8-23, 8-24.



Sketch of the combined penetration of the German Alpine Corps units on Kolovrat on 24 and 25 October 1917 (Source: M. Kuhar)

Any penetration can be carried out in two ways: by a breakthrough or by infiltration.<sup>189</sup> Infiltration is a technique and a process in which units move as individuals or small groups over, through, and around enemy positions.<sup>190</sup> undefended gaps are used to penetrate without a fight. Additional advantages for the attacker are blind spots due to the rugged terrain, terrain that is difficult to cross, and poor visibility.

In contact with the enemy or when infiltration is not possible, penetration is achieved by a breakthrough, in which an infantry manoeuvre with fire and movement is most important. Assault infantry units carry out an envelopment or flanking manoeuvre with direct fire support, and break through the enemy's defences by an assault; the principle of creating or exploiting the enemy's weak points still applies.<sup>191</sup>

During World War I, German assault units formed a lead and a support element in all directions of the penetration. The lead element had the task of penetrating into the depths of the enemy's battle formation in the shortest

<sup>189</sup> German: Infiltration.

<sup>190</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*; B. Furlan: *Bojno delovanje*, p. 91.

<sup>191</sup> <https://www.scribd.com/document/30313896/The-Rommel-Models-Impact-on-Maneuver-Warfare>, 25 June 2017, p. 3.



possible time, while avoiding stronger enemy forces as much as possible. The support element followed the lead element to protect the flanks in the depth of the penetration. Subsequent elements of the battle formation were in the role of a reserve or acted in accordance with the plan. They carried out the following tasks:

- Destroying individual enemy strong points which had been bypassed by units at the height of the attack;
- Taking the lead in the next stages of attack;
- Seizing opportunities in the later stages of attack.<sup>192</sup>

A tactically correct infantry attack was not the only important aspect of penetration. The real challenge was coordination and logistics. A breakthrough had to be carried out faster than the enemy's response and the introduction of reserve forces.<sup>193</sup> The real challenges were organizational, doctrinal and logistical. The deeper the penetration of the assault units, the greater the distance between them and the logistics support units whose priority task was ammunition replenishment.<sup>194</sup> The organizational challenge was timely and effective fire support, even after it was no longer possible to support the units due to the close proximity of the artillery, or after the infantry units were out of range of artillery or mortar support due to deep penetration. Means of transport had limited capabilities during World War I, especially on demanding terrain, so movement was slow, and was only possible on paved roads. An additional challenge was to ensure uninterrupted communications between the units and the artillery at the height of an infantry attack.

In the development of tactics, it was necessary to ensure the greatest possible independence of the assault units, which meant an increase in their firepower. Before World War I, infantry soldiers were exclusively armed with rifles, had control over machine guns at the regiment level, and controlled artillery support at the division level.<sup>195</sup>

The next challenge was to establish a system of combined arms operations.

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<sup>192</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 8-23, 8-24.

<sup>193</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p. 171.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Germany, Great Britain and France all entered the war with three branches: infantry, artillery and cavalry. All three branches fought incoherently and in an uncoordinated manner.<sup>196</sup>

According to Hunzeker, the beginning of the modern concept of warfare dates back to World War I. It was based on three elements: assault attack, combined arms operations, and mobile defence in depth.

The idea of assault units<sup>197</sup> began to develop at all levels, especially directly on the battlefields of the Western Front. The experiences of jäger, mountain and pioneer units were combined. The concept of manoeuvre warfare was being developed in mountain and jäger units even before World War I. These units promoted the independence of officers and used special equipment. This was also taken over by assault units. In pioneer units, this idea developed during direct combat. The pioneers had to breach barbed wire entanglements at the height of the attack. The assault tactics initiative came directly from the units, and was not the result of orders coming from the highest commands. In August 1915, German General Gaede ordered Captain Rohr to train units: “/... / based on the experience gained at the front”.<sup>198</sup> This was in accordance with the German tradition and doctrine of the time, which gave the company commander discretion with regard to the training of his company. Over the next few months, Captain Rohr transformed and trained his pioneer company into an elite infantry combat unit. He introduced several types of light infantry weapons to increase the firepower within the unit.

Long rifles with bayonets were not useful for close combat in narrow fire trenches, so they were replaced by short carbines. The greatest innovation was the introduction of light machine guns carried by only one soldier. In addition, Captain Rohr and his unit tested various types of personal equipment. His superiors tried to force bulletproof plates on him, which were to be worn on the chest. Rohr dismissed their usage, arguing that the speed and force of attack were still better protection than a steel bulletproof plate. The only steel piece of equipment he introduced was a new steel helmet called the *Stahlhelm*,

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>197</sup> The Germans used the terms *Stoormtruppe* and *Stosstruppe* for assault units.

<sup>198</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 47.

which later became a trademark of the German Army.<sup>199</sup> Leather protectors were sewn on uniform elbows and trousers and mountain boots and gaiters were introduced, as well as handy tools for close combat (shovels, axes, sticks), and pliers for cutting the barbed wire. In addition, each member of the assault unit was given several hand grenades, a bayonet, and two water canteens.<sup>200</sup>

It should be noted that the equipment was adapted to the tactics, and not the other way around. The essential features of the new assault unit tactics were:

- Replacing the classic battle formation with assault squads whose main effort was surprise;
- Using all possible support weapons (light machine guns, machine guns, rifles, light mortars, artillery, flame throwers, and hand grenades);
- The assault groups which were clearing the fire trenches were armed with hand grenades.

A significant change occurred when the squads became independent units. Captain Rohr and his instructors spread their knowledge to other units in courses and specialized training.<sup>201</sup> Rohr had the full support of his superiors, all the way to the Supreme Headquarters, and the concept was transformed into an official doctrine of the German Army.

Mountain units had a significant impact on the development of assault units, mainly due to the tactics of fighting on demanding terrain. Mountain units often had no direct contact with the adjacent units on the mountainous terrain, and local initiative was essential. Their personal equipment was adapted to these conditions.<sup>202</sup>

Captain Rohr's unit began conducting short training sessions for other units in December 1915 to spread the knowledge of the new methods of warfare throughout the German Army. An order was issued in May 1916 for all

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>200</sup> S. Bull: *Stosstrupaktik: German Assault Troops of the First World War*, Stroud Gloucestershire 2014, p. 85.

<sup>201</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>202</sup> S. Bull: *Stosstrupaktik*, p. 86.

sections of the German Army to send selected candidates for training. These then spread the knowledge within their units. Many German regiments later formed their own assault detachments.<sup>203</sup>

In the discussion of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, it is important to look at the three main German units that developed and trained in assault tactics. All three fought at the centre of the Tolmin breakthrough in October 1917. These were the German Alpine Corps, the 200<sup>th</sup> Division, and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion.<sup>204</sup> The Alpine Corps was formed in 1915 as a specialized mountain infantry unit which operated not only in the medium mountains of the Alps and the Carpathians, but also in other theatres of operation. Its members were trained in offensive operations and in penetration tactics of assault groups. In 1916 the Bavarian Lifeguards Regiment (Leib) carried out a one-month training course at a special training ground to prepare for the offensive at Verdun. The training focused on developing individual skills (throwing hand grenades) and the essential tasks of assault groups (fighting in trenches, attacking strong points from the flank and back). The training ended with live firing of battalions, regiments and the division.<sup>205</sup>

The 200<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Division, which was essentially the German Alpine Corps' 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade until 1916, had the same combat character as the German Alpine Corps.

The Württemberg Mountain Battalion gained important experience in penetration tactics, especially infiltration, on the Western Front (the High Vosges). The French did not have a continuous line of defence in this hilly area, but individual strong points for perimeter defence. This allowed the Württemberg Mountain Battalion to use the infiltration tactics, and flank and back attacks.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> M. Grošelj: *Taktika nemških jurišnih enot 1. svetovne vojne*, diploma thesis, Ljubljana 2012, p. 21.

<sup>204</sup> S. Bull: *Stosstruktaktik*, p. 86.

<sup>205</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 67.

<sup>206</sup> S. Bull: *Stosstruktaktik*, p. 86.

The assault tactics were based on five main components:

- Irregular and scattered formation;
- Independent operation of small units;
- Fire and movement manoeuvres;
- Own firepower (organic);
- Attacking objectives in depth and bypassing fortified strong points.

At the beginning of World War I, the smallest independent combat unit was a company with two hundred members, commanded by a captain. Company commanders could not fully control the scattered nonlinear battle formation, so they began to form platoons with forty members and half platoons with twenty members. Experience showed that units had to be dispersed due to the density of enemy fire, which was only achieved by the introduction of squads (eight to twelve members) led by non-commissioned officers. By taking advantage of terrain diversity, these smaller groups were not only easier to lead, but also had more chances of survival. At the height of an attack, squads did not attract the particular attention of the defenders, which increased the possibility of surprise.<sup>207</sup>

Independent operation required the training of small unit commanders up to company level (squad, platoon and company commanders). Junior officers and non-commissioned officers were suddenly at the centre of the action. They had to study the situation and make decisions in direct combat. Superiors at all levels of command encouraged their commanders to make independent decisions and take disciplined initiative.

The third important component of the assault attack was manoeuvre. Manoeuvre stands for the use of forces through movement and in combination with speed and firepower. It is one of the most important functions.<sup>208</sup> Even before the beginning of World War I, all three countries (Germany, Great Britain, and France) used the manoeuvre as a tactical procedure in an attack with the aim of neutralizing the enemy. All three armies, however, either abolished or forgot about manoeuvre in small tactical units at the beginning

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<sup>207</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p.182.

<sup>208</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p. 59.

of the war. They reintroduced it as early as 1915 and 1916.<sup>209</sup> The reason was simple. The movement of troops had to be protected by direct fire.

Attacking units searched for weak points in the enemy's defence, and immediately used them to penetrate. Strong points of resistance were bypassed by the first assault groups. The units which followed the assault squads then destroyed the individual isolated points of resistance.

Manoeuvre ensured success if the assault units had enough firepower to penetrate. It was important that the enemy was pressed to the ground by fire, and prevented from operating at critical moments of the attack. The use of machine guns and light machine guns was key.

The German army quickly recognized the capabilities of light machine guns, but did not introduce them into the standard weapon equipment of its units until the middle of 1916. The units of the German Alpine Corps were equipped with them in September 1917, a good month before the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. Machine guns and light machine guns enabled the attacking units to provide a sufficiently high concentration of direct fire and ensure local superiority, and consequently to create the conditions for the successful breakthrough of assault and infantry units. The introduction of light machine guns was a great advantage, as the units were able to quickly follow the assault groups at the height of the attack. When the assault group was clearing the trenches, light machine guns were used to fire above the trenches to prevent any enemy manoeuvres or counterattack.<sup>210</sup>

The purpose of attacks was to penetrate to the depths of the enemy's positions, which meant a deep penetration into the enemy's battle formation, and the occupation of key enemy points such as command posts, logistic support, artillery capabilities, and communications. Attacks began in a rather narrow area, in several places at once, and with prior reconnaissance and search for the enemy's weak points. The most important thing for the success of the units was the capture of assault units, which were well armed and trained for independent combat even in temporary encirclement.

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<sup>209</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p.185.

<sup>210</sup> M. Grošelj: *Taktika nemških jurišnih enot 1. svetovne vojne*, p. 25.

An innovation compared to the past was that three different types of squads were formed within a platoon: the assault squad, the light machine gun squad, and the infantry squad. This allowed the platoon commander to carry out an effective independent manoeuvre. Under the protection of the light machine gun squad, the assault and infantry squads carried out a manoeuvre from the flank or back, which was followed by an incursion into the defence trenches with hand grenades, and penetration through the trenches into the depths of the enemy's positions. Members of the light machine gun squad were able to carry out a small manoeuvre on their own. The squad had one light machine gun which was carried by the gunner. Three or four soldiers carried ammunition and water for the light machine gun; four or five soldiers were armed with rifles and hand grenades, and formed the assault unit as required.<sup>211</sup>

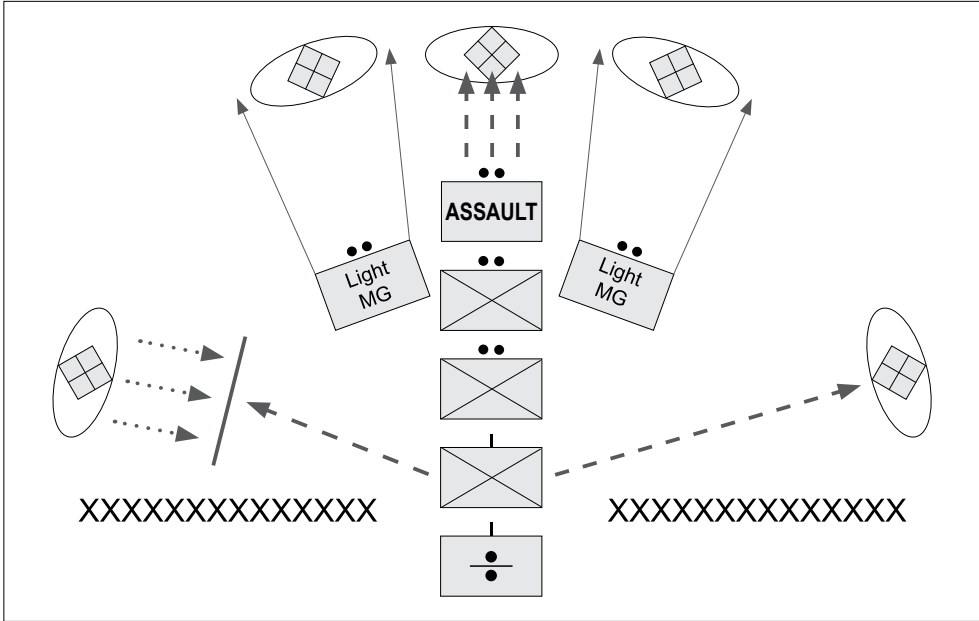
The assault group attack tactics were perfected and exercised thoroughly, and then implemented directly at the front. The squad's objectives were limited at first, but the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive was an example of penetration not only at the tactical but also at the operational level.

The battle formation and the role of units and individuals were precisely defined. At the centre of the attack was the assault squad with eight soldiers divided into two groups. The task of the assault squad was to lead infantry platoons and companies across no-man's land and barbed wire entanglements, to break together into the enemy's fire trenches, and to continue through them to penetrate into the depths of the enemy's defence. They destroyed pillboxes and machine gun positions with hand grenades and explosives. The main weapons were hand grenades, cold weapons, and pistols. Each member carried six hand grenades. If necessary, they all threw their hand grenades at the same time as a salvo during the attack. Hand grenades almost entirely replaced rifles in the assault groups.<sup>212</sup> The assault squads were closely followed by an infantry platoon with light machine guns. Its two main tasks were to protect and support the assault squad. The infantry with light machine guns protected the flanks, and limited the operation of enemy machine gunners with heavily

<sup>211</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>212</sup> M. Grošelj: *Taktika nemških jurišnih enot 1. svetovne vojne*, pp. 24-25.

concentrated fire. The support platoon was followed by the company and other units, which were ready to expand the conquered space, secure the flanks, and break the resistance at individual points of defence. If necessary, they took the lead at the height of the attack.



*Schematic diagram of the concept of the assault units' breakthrough into the enemy's battle formation (M. Kuhar)*

Light mortars, grenade launchers, and part of the support artillery restricted the enemy's operations, while the other part of the artillery blocked or isolated the attacked area, and prevented the operation of the enemy's artillery and other weapons.<sup>213</sup>

In addition to the assault units, an important innovation of the penetration tactics was the introduction of artillery preparation and support during the attack. It was not yet possible to speak of joint combat operations at the beginning of World War I. The infantry and artillery branches operated completely separately. The artillery carried out a fire preparation for the attack, and then the infantry units attacked without artillery fire support. The

<sup>213</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 85.



main question in the development of penetration tactics was how to bring the infantry as close to the enemy as possible under the protection of artillery fire. Two elements were important: the echelonment of artillery fire, and the synchronization of attack between the artillery and the infantry.

The initiator of the development of the concept of joint warfare of the artillery and infantry was the German Lieutenant Colonel Georg Bruchmüller. He retired before World War I, but began working again in the Landwehr artillery on the Eastern Front during the war.<sup>214</sup>

Bruchmüller's artillery tactics contained certain innovations: the arrival and deployment of the artillery at the starting positions in the greatest possible secrecy; no sighting-in of artillery; unified command of the artillery at the beginning of the offensive; several hours of heavy and concentrated fire using 25% gas grenades; and the focus of artillery on the destruction of communications, command posts, and machine gun and artillery positions. In addition to quality artillery support planning, one of his important innovations was the "Feuerwaltz", which literally translates into a "fire waltz". This was actually a rolling barrage that Bruchmüller tested in the battles of Witonitz and Toboly on the Eastern Front. Similarly, artillery support was carried out in the late spring and summer of 1916 on the Western Front near Verdun, where the applicability of the concept was well understood and used by Captain Rohr. The aim of the concept was for the assault units to follow the artillery rolling barrage as closely as possible at the height of the attack. This significantly shortened the time between the last grenade explosion and the incursion of assault units into the enemy positions. Two things were very important: the discipline of artillery fire, which had to operate exactly according to the timeline; and the training level of the infantry, who had to be able to follow the explosions at a distance of up to fifty metres.<sup>215</sup>

Light artillery (field cannons, howitzers, and mortars) allowed for a rolling barrage in support of the assault units. Heavy cannons and howitzers allowed the engagement of the enemy's artillery, and the blocking of directions from which the enemy's reinforcements might arrive. Most of the artillery was

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

intended to neutralize the enemy, and not to destroy it. Only heavy mortars were designed to destroy specific targets, such as command posts and fortified pillboxes.<sup>216</sup>

The units in the offensive were of course aware of the artillery limitations. The first problem was mobility, as there were no heavy fast-tow artillery trucks at the time. In addition, the enemy had its own artillery, which posed a threat. When overexposed, the attackers risked being defeated before the attack even began. The third limitation was the enemy's battle formation, as shelters were also built in depth (longitudinal distance), thus protecting the forces during the artillery preparation of the attack. The fourth limitation or risk was the length of artillery preparation. The longer it took, the more likely it was for the defender to deploy the reserves to the main effort of the attack in time, and thus stop the penetration.<sup>217</sup>

To summarize, the elements which improved penetration tactics can be divided into four important areas: a new concept of assault units; combined infantry and artillery warfare; the introduction of light machine guns for the assault units; and partially decentralized command (*auftragstaktik*). In a number of works in the literature, penetration tactics are often referred to as infiltration tactics, and associated with the German General Oskar von Hutier, who used these tactics to occupy the Latvian city of Riga, and was awarded the Pour le Mérite for this success.

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>217</sup> M. A. Hunzeker: *Perfecting War*, p. 173.

## BEGINNING OF THE PENETRATION

### The 14<sup>th</sup> Army Corps' tasks

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps' task was to penetrate along the Soča Valley towards Žaga in the direction of Trnovo, and along the hills to the Resia Valley, over Stol, the Vršič Pass, and the Zaprikraj Pass, to Drežnica and Kobarid. Later, after the occupation of Breginj and Robič across the valleys of Resia and Učje, the units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps had the task of reaching Gemona del Friuli (*Slo. Humin*) and Osoppo. The Berrer Corps had to conquer the Ježa Ridge and then penetrate towards Cividale del Friuli across the settlement of Sv. Martin. The Scotti Corps had to conquer the peaks south of Ježa (Varda-Čemponi-Grad, Globočak-Čičer), and then descend over Castelmonte (*Slo. Stara Gora*) towards Cividale del Friuli. The Stein Corps, together with the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian and 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Divisions, penetrated through the Soča Valley. They quickly reached Kobarid by occupying Krn and its southern slopes, and then penetrated through Breginj and Robič into the Nadiža Valley. Special mention should be made of the tasks of the German Alpine Corps, whose objective was to occupy Hill 1114 as an important position on Kolovrat. The main objectives after the occupation of Kolovrat were to conquer Matajur and secure the Upper Nadiža Valley.

First, the majority of units were to head south of the Tolmin Bridgehead, because one of the objectives was to capture the heavily fortified mountain of Korada, which was an important position on the southern side of Kolovrat. This objective was later left to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army, and General von Below shifted his focus to a penetration in the direction of Robič, because he found the original Tagliamento objective to be too modest. A penetration in this

direction was also logistically important, as there was only one railway line from Gemona del Friuli and Tarcento (*Slo. Čenta*), along which the advancing units could be supplied.

The Cossack group, consisting of the 60<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Divisions with 424 cannons, was to attack at the same time in the southern part of the front, in Banjšice, on the northern wing of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army, occupy Veliki vrh (704m), and penetrate along the valley to the Avšček stream. Some units swapped before the beginning of the offensive. One such swap took place between 12 and 15 October on Rombon, when the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bosnian-Herzegovinian Regiment were secretly replaced by soldiers of the 59<sup>th</sup> Salzburg Infantry Regiment. In order for the Italians not to notice the change, the soldiers of the 59<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had to wear fezzes instead of hats, and the Bosnian muezzin remained with them so that they would not forget to pray. The Italians, however, noticed the change in language (the soldiers were speaking German), and asked the Austrians from the trenches why they had converted to Islam. The Bosnian battalions were transferred to the 55<sup>th</sup> Division in the area between Javoršček and Krn, where the Bosnian-Herzegovinian battalions had previously been deployed.<sup>218</sup>

General Otto von Below issued an order for the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, part of which was published by the Italian historian Francesco Fadini in his book *Caporetto dalla parte del vincitore*: “The enemy must be driven from the Kras across the Tagliamento. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army will therefore break through the enemy’s positions near Tolmin and Bovec in order to occupy the Cividale del Friuli-Gemona del Friuli line in the first raid. It will focus its energy on the right wing from the very beginning.”<sup>219</sup>

The artillery units, commanded by General von Berendt, began artillery fire at 2:00am. The firing reached its peak at around 3:00am. Between 2:00am and 4:30am, gas grenades were also used extensively, which accounted for about twenty-five percent of all the grenades fired. At the beginning, emphasis was placed on light and medium cannons, while the mortars remained silent.

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<sup>218</sup> M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, pp. 184-185; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 178.

<sup>219</sup> F. Fadini: *Caporetto*, p. 220.

Numerous Italian searchlights tried to break through the fog and detect the positions of the Austro-German artillery, and many Italian batteries responded blindly. In time, fewer Italian cannons responded to the fire, and many searchlights went out. The firing on the Italian positions lasted until 4:30am. Weak barrage fire was detected in the direction of Kozlov rob and around the ruins of the Tolmin road bridge, and some heavy projectiles fell in the vicinity of Kozaršče, Modrej, and Most na Soči. The lull lasted until 6:00am, when the attacker's artillery dropped destructive fire. The artillery fired on the enemy positions in the front lines and immediately in the rear, and heavy long-range cannons ravaged the Italian rear area, destroying supply routes, command posts, communications, reserves, and fortified defence points. Mortars aimed at the first defence lines, their shells destroying the dense barbed wire nets and trenches in the first defence belt. The firing reached its maximum intensity towards the end. During the artillery preparation, the assault formations left their initial positions, and sneaked to the Italian barbed wire entanglements. At exactly 8:00am, artillery fire was moved to the rear, and the infantry could begin to attack. The first positions were won without a shot being fired.

## **Use of chemical weapons in the Bovec Basin**

Some of the literature proposes a theory that many Italians died from gas grenades during the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. They were also one of the main reasons for the Italian defeat. The Italian and Austro-Hungarian Armies used gas grenades in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive as well as in the previous offensives on the Soča River, so the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is no exception with regard to the use of chemical weapons.

The gas attack in the Bovec Basin had terrible consequences. Grenades with green cross markings were used, which contained the trichloromethyl chloroformate of formic acid, under the name of "Perstoff", or diphosgene. The Krauss Corps was assigned a special German engineer battalion specializing in chemical weapons attacks. The plan for the penetration in the Bovec Basin included the mortar destruction of all obstacles and the first line of battle.

The survivors were expected to hide in underground shelters, and most of the reserves in large caves in the cutting which holds the road from Bovec to Čezsoča. The difference in altitude between the plain and the Soča river bed enabled the construction of safe shelters, which were only vulnerable to gas attacks.

The Germans brought more than a thousand 'projectors' of rudimentary mortars with electric ignition and propulsive charging. In addition to the percussion fuse and a small explosive charge, they contained about fourteen litres of the liquid chemical weapons diphosgene. About 900 such tubes were brought unnoticed on 23 October, and sunk at a particular angle on the slopes south of Ravelnik in the evening. If the weather conditions had prevented a gas attack, an alternative was prepared with about a thousand high explosive mines. Using the electric fuse, the gas mines were able to launch all at once. The gas attack was successful, and was carried out as early as 2:00am. According to various calculations, between 842 and 912 of the 1000 planned projectors reached the positions on time. The Italian soldiers did not expect a gas attack, and had poor protective masks which did not adequately protect them from the toxic gases. About two thousand gas grenades were fired in half a minute, destroying almost the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion – about 350 or 400 soldiers of the 87<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division's Friuli Brigade.<sup>220</sup>

## The Krauss Corps

General Krauss held his command post above the settlement of Kal-Koritnica, in the position from which the Bovec Basin is best seen. Before the beginning of the attack, he gathered about 470 cannons in his sector, and distributed tasks to the units: the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division was to break through the entire basin, along the slopes of Kanin and Polovnik, and occupy the Žaga Gorge

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<sup>220</sup> P. Gaspari: *La verità su Caporetto*, p. 44; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 301; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 9. The exact number of dead Italian soldiers from the Friuli Brigade in the Naklo Ravine has never been precisely determined. Estimates of the number of dead Italian soldiers vary widely, ranging from 350 to 800. The Italians often exaggerated the number of casualties in order to prove, at the peace conference after the war, that they had the right to the territories of Austria-Hungary because of the victims.

and Stol. To the right, the Edelweiss Division was to penetrate towards the Italian positions on Čukla, in the direction of the Prevala Pass, break through into the Učje Valley, and occupy all the neighbouring peaks. The 55<sup>th</sup> Division was to occupy parts of Polovnik near Planina Jama; Krasji vrh; the Zaprikraj, Vršič and Vrata Passes; the settlement of Drežniške Ravne; and Kobarid, thus closing the ring around the Italians. The next day, the Edelweiss Division was to advance towards the Tanamea Pass (*It. Passo di Tanamea*) in the direction of Gemona del Friuli, and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division and the 55<sup>th</sup> Division were to advance south of Stol towards Tarcento. The German Jäger Division was to monitor the progress of the first three divisions, and then head towards Kobarid. In his order to attack, General Krauss emphasized the fastest possible occupation of Mount Montemaggiore (*It. Punta di Montemaggiore*), which was the focal point of the Italian defensive lines. The aforementioned German gas mine throwers of the 35<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Battalion did not reach their starting positions until 23<sup>rd</sup> October, and entrenched themselves just before the attack. They activated their deadly weapons at 2:00am, although there was no test sighting-in due to time constraints and the concealment of intentions. Nevertheless, their effect in the Naklo Ravine near Bovec was very effective. The remaining artillery in the Bovec Basin had a poorer effect, especially in the higher positions around Rombon and the Vršič Pass. From 2:00am to 6:00am, they mostly fired gas grenades, and at 6:30am they also activated mortars. The firing reached its peak at around 7:45am. The infantry attack began as soon as the artillery diverted its fire to the rear, which was at 9:00am.<sup>221</sup>

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division had its starting position north-east of Ravelnik, including the summit, and on the slopes towards the Koritnica and Soča Rivers. The 26<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment was in the middle; to its right was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tyrolean Imperial Rifle Regiment; behind it were the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Tyrolean Imperial Rifle Regiments. Two battalions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tyrolean Imperial Rifle Regiment were to occupy and protect Ravelnik and the positions on the left bank of the Soča River, while the Italian soldiers bravely defended themselves on some slopes of Rombon, not giving up. The attack stalled in the vicinity of Čezsoča, but the soldiers reached the main Italian defensive line

<sup>221</sup> M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 194; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 213-214.

in the valley at around 12 noon. The resistance in the third line of defence, which leaned against Polovnik, was broken at around 5:30pm, while the 26<sup>th</sup> Regiment climbed to the top of Poljanica without resistance.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion continued its penetration towards the Podčela Ridge, east of the Boka Stream, and occupied the third Italian line of defence without much resistance. The breakthrough through the Žaga Ravine failed on the first day, as the Italians had mined the bridge over the Boka Stream, which was in flood, and the defence on the western Ridge of Polovnik and north of Log Čezsoški and Žaga made it impossible to repair the bridge. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment attacked the positions at Podčela at around 9:00pm, but the attack was continued on the next day due to darkness. The success of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division was nevertheless great; about 3000 Italian soldiers were captured and eighty cannons were seized.<sup>222</sup>

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Edelweiss Division began to attack on the eastern slopes of Rombon, with assault detachments of the 59<sup>th</sup> Regiment and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Tyrolean Imperial Jäger Regiment. The Italian soldiers allowed the Austrians to reach the barbed wire entanglements in the fresh snow, and then surprised them with machine gun and mortar fire. The attackers suffered heavy losses, and made no advance for the next two days. The pursuit did not begin until the Italians decided to withdraw due to the situation in the rear. Despite its failure, the attack on Rombon resulted in the Alpine Brigade being tied up, and thus contributed to the attack in the valley. The units ascending towards Čukla stopped at the positions around Planina Goričica (Goričica mountain pasture) before the evening, and the group for the occupation of the Prevala Pass stopped before Planina Krnica (Krnica mountain pasture).<sup>223</sup>

The 55<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division encountered sharp resistance from the Italian army and bad weather conditions during the attack, which resulted in a half-hour delay in the infantry's attack. The Italians organized a counterattack in some places. Due to the weather conditions, the 38<sup>th</sup> Brigade was unable to launch the attack, so only the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Carinthian Regiment under the command of Captain Barger was effective. This battalion descended

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<sup>222</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 214.

<sup>223</sup> M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 195; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 215.



the steep slopes of Javoršček into the narrow depths of the Slatenik Gorge, climbed the slopes of Polovnik to the Italian defence lines which it broke through, and reached the foot of Krasji vrh on the same day. Due to the bad news spreading from the valley, the Italian units first withdrew from Polovnik and Krasji vrh on the night of 24-25 October, and then from the positions near Planina Predolina (Predolina mountain pasture), so the way to Kobarid was open for the 55<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division.<sup>224</sup>

## German mortars on the Tolmin Bridgehead

German mortars played an important role in the breakthrough of the Stein Corps. Their use and distribution are described by Dr. Hans Killian.<sup>225</sup> German mortars were divided into several groups: the northern group of the Wandelsleben sector in the Dolje area had the mortars of the 12<sup>th</sup> Company: four heavy and eight medium; its task was to prepare for the breakthrough of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division towards the village of Gabrje. The second group was in positions on Kozlov rob, and supported the action from the south, together with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division. Most of the mortars (the central group) were divided into five subgroups under the command of Wandelsleben, with two reinforced mountain companies from the German Alpine Corps, and three companies of the 11<sup>th</sup> Mortar Battalion. Batteries were formed to facilitate the sighting-in, and as soon as one weapon sighted the objective, the remaining mortars followed suit. A number of the mortars of the German Alpine Corps were reinforced with a squad of light mortars from the infantry regiments (a total of 24 medium and 44 light mortars), and were deployed on the left bank of the Soča River near Sveti Urh. Their goal was to occupy positions around the church of St. Daniel. Most of the mortars had to fire from the mountain of Sveta Marija at the positions before Volče to create passages over the barbed wire entanglements. To cover the fairly long distance to the objective, mortars had to be placed on the most exposed lines along the slopes of Sveta Marija.

<sup>224</sup> M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 205; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 216.

<sup>225</sup> More in: H. Killian: *Wir stürmten durch Friaul*, Neckargemünd 1978.

Three more mortar companies of the 11<sup>th</sup> Mortar Battalion were added to this group, each with two heavy mortars and eight medium mortars; they had to open the way to Volče for the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment.

The Spiess group and its subgroups were stationed in the southern area of the mountain of Mengore and south of Kozaršče. The 26<sup>th</sup> Company was stationed at the chapel ruins (Hill 453), and the 5<sup>th</sup> Company, reinforced with light mortar squads, was stationed south of the Kozaršče-Modrejce road. The northern subgroup had 3 heavy, 12 medium, and 8 light launchers at its disposal, and its objective was to cross the deep obstacles and ditches before Čiginj.<sup>226</sup>

## **The Stein Corps and the attack of the 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian and 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Divisions**

The 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division had to penetrate the Italian defence lines of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division, and advance towards Kobarid from the summit of Krn to the village of Dolje. The breakthrough of the Italian positions on Mrzli vrh and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian defence line in the direction of Kožljak and Pleče was especially demanding. The division carried out its tasks in cooperation with the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division. The attack on the Italian positions on Hill 1181 (Planina Lapač – Lapač mountain pasture) was carried out by units of the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade, while units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade successfully penetrated the area of Planina Leskovca (Leskovca mountain pasture). Despite the heavy snowfall, the Italians resisted strongly and organized a counterattack with two battalions of the Caltanissetta Brigade, but the 50<sup>th</sup> Division successfully repulsed it. The left wing units of the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade arrived in the valley near Gabrje before 9:00am, suppressing the resistance of the Italian units there, and thus enabled the advance of the right column of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, which was stopped at the exit from Dolje. On the right wing, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade advanced slowly and with difficulty

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<sup>226</sup>L. Galić: *Cvetje – Mengore: v viharju vojne 1915-1917*, p. 242.

towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian defence line, which was defended by three battalions of the Etna Brigade in this area. After the successful bombing of the mountain Batognica, they managed to shake the entire defence system around Krn, and force the Italians to withdraw from their position below Maselnik and Sleme. The summit of Krn was only occupied on the next day, as the Italian units at the peak successfully defended themselves. The Austro-Hungarian units reached the fortified village of Krn at 11:00am, and sent more than 1000 Italian prisoners and 13 confiscated cannons into their rear area. Most of the division then focused on attacking the fortified line from Kožljak to the village of Vrsno, while the resistance of the Italians was still strong.<sup>227</sup>

The 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade soon broke through to the villages of Ladra and Idrsko, for its advance party to take part in the occupation of Kobarid, together with parts of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division. By evening, 90 cannons had been seized and 7000 soldiers captured. The order for the next day was to advance towards the village of Robič, across the villages of Idrsko and Svino, and occupy the mountain of Mija. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade, which advanced through the village of Ladra, was to continue in the direction of Logje or Breginjski kot in order to establish contact with the 55<sup>th</sup> Division, and close the ring around the Italians on the left bank of the Soča River. At 10:45am, the commander of the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Corps learned that the front line of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division had been breached on the Sleme-Gabrje line. This resulted in much confusion. The corps reserve consisted only of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division with the Foggia Brigade, so the corps command sent reserve units in different directions: the 280<sup>th</sup> Regiment to help the Italian units in Žaga, and the other two to the left bank of the Soča River. The 281<sup>st</sup> Regiment was ordered to occupy positions on the mountain of Volnik (*It. Monte Lanaro*) near the village of Ladra; and the 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was to gather the retreating parts of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division, and stop the enemy. As this was impossible due to the new conditions, the 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was deployed in the extension of the line held by the 281<sup>st</sup> Regiment all the way to Idrsko. It received support in the form of four batteries of 105mm cannons near the village of Svino, and one mountain battery before the village of Mlinsko. While the 281<sup>st</sup> Regiment managed to deploy on Volnik, the 282<sup>nd</sup>

<sup>227</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 204.

Regiment broke through to the village of Smast, where the command of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division was located. The Austro-Hungarian 50<sup>th</sup> Division also attacked the 43<sup>rd</sup> Italian Division. Its Genoa and Etna Brigades defended themselves, but withdrew when the attackers bypassed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian line from the valley. The division command withdrew to Kobarid, and the commander ordered that the most important of the three bridges in the area be destroyed upon the enemy's arrival. The remains of the division ended in captivity, and the steel bridge near Kobarid was blown up, cutting off the units on the left bank of the Soča River. By evening, the soldiers of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division had captured about 7000 Italian soldiers and 90 cannons.<sup>228</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division had to break through the Italian defences on both sides of the Soča River near Tolmin, and penetrate towards Kobarid as quickly as possible. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment advanced from Bučenica, between the church of St. Daniel and the village of Soča, towards the road to Kobarid. To their left was the German Alpine Corps, advancing towards Kolovrat. The starting positions of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division's units were on the left bank of the Soča River, between Kozlov rob and the village of Soča, near the village of Dolje. After a short stop before the village of Gabrje, the battalions of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment moved along the road towards the village of Volarje at 9:30am, without encountering Italian resistance. At the same time, the division artillery was also ordered to move. Just after 10:00am, the attackers successfully occupied the village of Volarje, and advanced towards the village of Selišče. At around 11:00am, the attackers reached the second line of defence. The left column seized several heavy batteries in the valley below Kolovrat, and three battalions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment arrived in the village of Idrsko around noon. At the same time, one of the battalions of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment was already in the village of Kamno, and was advancing towards Kobarid. It is interesting that the Italians only had one company of the Napoli Brigade on the right bank of the Soča River below the village of Foni, which was the only one to help the two companies in the village of Dolje that morning. The Italian resistance was weak, and the Italian soldiers withdrew and surrendered en masse. The advance party of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment occupied

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<sup>228</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 205; M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 207.

the bridge between the villages of Ladra and Idrsko at 2:30pm, so that the left and right wings of the attacking groups made contact. One battalion of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, under the command of Major Eichholz, penetrated towards the village of Livek to secure the flank of most of the units which were penetrating towards Kobarid. It reached the village of Golobi at around 3:30pm, where it captured a large unit of Italian Bersaglieri and some artillery; there was an engagement with the new reinforcements of the Italian 7<sup>th</sup> Corps north of Golobi. On the way from Idrsko to Kobarid, the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division seized a large number of the Italian pack animals, trucks, cannons, and prisoners. Most of the prisoners greeted the German and Austro-Hungarian units with enthusiasm. In the penetration to Kobarid, a major engagement took place in the village of Mlinsko, and then the way to Kobarid was open, so that Kobarid was occupied at around 4:00pm. Units of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division continued their journey towards the village of Robič, where they encountered Italian resistance near the village of Staro selo, which they successfully suppressed, arriving in Robič at 10:30pm. In addition to Robič, the village of Kred was also occupied, where the corps command was located.<sup>229</sup>

Today, the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is known mainly for the successful penetration of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, which broke through the front line near Tolmin, and penetrated through the valley towards Kobarid. The idea of penetrating through the valley was developed by General Krauss. His idea was to avoid the high and defended peaks, as this would make it easier to encircle and isolate the Italian units, assuming, of course, that the mountain Ridges would also be decisively attacked, and that initiative would be taken.<sup>230</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division thus penetrated 27 kilometres into the enemy's rear area in one day, facilitating the work of other units. It captured about 10,000 Italian prisoners, including the entire headquarters of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Division, together with General Farisogli. Another success of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division was the capture of 100 Italian cannons, and the commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, General Lequis, was awarded the Pour le Mérite for his success. Reinforcements were

<sup>229</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 206; P. Gaspari: *La verità su Caporetto*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>230</sup> M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, p. 378; M. Thompson: *The White War*, pp. 296-297; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 13.

sent to the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, such as the Potenza Brigade and the Massa Carrara Brigade, but most of the units did not arrive at their starting positions in time. The Italian oversight of the military developments on 24 October was poor, as all communication links were cut off. This meant that at 1:00pm the commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, Cavaciocchi, did not yet have an overview of what was happening to his units. He demanded the help of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps, which was to destroy the enemy with a counterattack by the village of Livek, but failed to do so. General Montuori arrived at the Corps Command in Kred at 3:15pm, taking command of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Corps. He sent a regiment of the Potenza Brigade to the narrow entrance to the Nadiža Valley near the village of Robič, while another regiment was to restrict access to the village of Breginj in Breginjski kot, and occupy Stol. It was too late for an effective Italian defence; the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' headquarters moved to Breginj; and the entire 43<sup>rd</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and most of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, landed in captivity by the end of the following day.<sup>231</sup>

## **The German Alpine Corps, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, and the attack on Hill 1114**

The tasks of General von Tutschek's German Alpine Corps were to secure the left flank of the Stein Corps, conquer Kolovrat and the area of the source of the Idrija River, and open the way through the Nadiža Valley. The starting positions or rallying points of units were on and below Bučenica, and on Mengore. The attack began at 8:00am, in the direction of the village of Volče or the Volče field with the church of St. Daniel. On the left wing of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Jäger Brigade was the 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment; in the middle was the Bavarian Leib Regiment; and on the right wing was the Württemberg Mountain Battalion (which almost reached the formation of a regiment with six infantry and three machine gun companies). The forest and the fog and rain concealed the German units from the Italian observers. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment was in reserve. A detachment of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, with about

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<sup>231</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 206.

200 soldiers, was led by First Lieutenant Rommel. The main goal of the attack on the first day was to reach the node of all the positions and defence lines on Kolovrat, and the heavily fortified Hill 1114. The 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment penetrated the Kamnica Valley, the Leib Regiment towards the summit of Hlevnik, and the Württemberg Mountain Battalion through the northern part of Hlevnik to the village of Foni. The 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment had to conquer V Špiku (Hill 732 or Veliki Špik) at the back of Dole, and from there continue on to the chapel of Sleme (869m), and reach the back of Kolovrat. The Leib Regiment's objective was to occupy Hill 1114. The Regiment Commander, Major von Bothmer, sent part of the team to the source of the Kamnica River to help the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment advance towards the mountain of Ježa. The Bavarian Leib Regiment and its units occupied positions around the graveyard in Volče, and began to climb Hlevnik. At 8:30am, the units of the Leib Regiment had already penetrated towards Leščje, and suppressed the strong Italian resistance at 10:30am, and captured about 350 Italian soldiers. They occupied Leščje at around 11:00am and Planina Kovačič (Kovačič mountain pasture) at 11:15am (824m), and then stopped for a short time because they were threatened by their own artillery. The advance continued at around 2:00pm.<sup>232</sup>

Rommel's detachment, in accordance with the order of Major Sprösser, penetrated along the northern slopes of Hlevnik. A kilometre east of Hill 824, Italian machine guns began firing at the head of Rommel's detachment, so Rommel predicted that an attack without artillery support on both sides of the route would be hopeless or would result in heavy losses. He chose a different solution. The former advance party stopped in front of the enemy, and Rommel sent the second unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Company as a new advance party through a stone gully about 200 metres below the enemy positions to the south, to bypass the enemy on the top left. Following the steep ravine, they moved through the bushes and came to a path that led eastward down the slope. A well-fortified Italian position was visible behind it, rising from the direction of Leščje (577m). Rommel decided to invade the enemy positions, and at the same time found that his unit was already in the area of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian line of defence, and that the road at the edge of the forest was a supply route to

<sup>232</sup>M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 305; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 207.

the Italian positions in the area of the 1<sup>st</sup> Italian line of defence at the church of St. Daniel, or to the artillery observation posts on the eastern slopes of Hlevnik. He ordered Lance Corporal Kiefner to penetrate along the concealed path with a crew of eight men and invade the Italian positions, capturing the crew on both sides of the path, preferably without firing or throwing hand grenades. Kiefner successfully occupied the enemy positions, capturing 17 Italian soldiers and a machine gun.<sup>233</sup>

Rommel then decided to take all his units and the units of Schiellein's detachment, which were assigned to him after Kiefner's raid, along a concealed path. He had to decide how to destroy the Italian positions, and he had several options at his disposal: to advance along the slope; to advance along the valley; or to break through in the direction of the summit of Hlevnik. He chose the latter option, as it would be easier for him to occupy the Italian positions, which were spread all over the slope, after the capture of Hlevnik. The further the soldiers penetrated into the Italian rear area, the less the Italians were prepared for their arrival. Due to the speed of the German advance, the German units were threatened by their own artillery. The German advance parties, including Rommel's unit, bypassed well-defended Italian positions several times, as they were looking for weak points that were more favourable for penetration. At 11:00am, the speed of advance led Rommel's detachment to the Ridge which stretches to the top of Hlevnik to the east. The soldiers came into contact with parts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Leib Regiment, then turned to the northern slope of Hlevnik, climbed to the summit at around 12 noon, and captured a crew of Italian soldiers. They cleared the Italian artillery nests between the top of Hlevnik and the village of Foni, in accordance with the order of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, and searched the area of Hlevnik and the nearby pass to the south-west.

The Leib Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion moved over Hill 1066 towards the top of Hill 1114, and Rommel's detachment followed along its right flank. Rommel's detachment approached Hill 1066 at 5:00pm, when gunfire was heard from the direction of the forward company of the Leib Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Rommel ordered his units to take cover to the right of the path at the level

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<sup>233</sup> E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 3–16.



of the Leib Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. He soon found his units fighting strong Italian crews at positions 500 metres north-west of Hill 1114, and on Hill 1114. He ordered Second Lieutenant Triebig's 1<sup>st</sup> Company to clear the Italian positions to the right of the path, south-west of Hill 1066; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Companies to clear parts of the Italian positions west of Hill 1066.

Before darkness fell, Rommel wanted to inspect the positions in front of Hill 1114, establish communications with the Leib Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, and familiarize himself with the further course of events. He went to the right wing of the Leib Regiment's 12<sup>th</sup> Company with Second Lieutenant Streicher, where they agreed and decided that it was not possible to capture the Italian high altitude positions on Hill 1114 without artillery preparation, or the positions at an altitude of 500 metres north-west of Hill 1114, which the German artillery had not yet reached. It was getting dark and the 1<sup>st</sup> Company's attempts to capture the remaining parts of the Italian positions at an altitude of 500 metres north-west of Hill 1114 failed. Parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were preparing for the night, and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Companies were given instructions for night reconnaissance. Rommel's units set up a command post in the Italian artillery observation post. Shortly afterwards, Rommel had to come to the command post of the Leib Regiment's Commander, Major Bothmer, which was close to his, in a shelter on Hill 1066. Major Bothmer demanded that Rommel's detachment submit to his command, despite the fact that Rommel was receiving orders from Major Sprösser. Major Bothmer forbade Rommel to operate west of or in the direction of Hill 1114, because this was the area of operation of his own regiment. He gave parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and Rommel's units the choice of either occupying Hill 1114 behind the Leib Regiment on 25 October, or following the regiment to the west. Rommel was shocked by this, as it meant fighting in the second line, and was a deprivation of his freedom of action. A supply officer from the Württemberg Mountain Battalion then arrived at Rommel's command post with the message that Major Sprösser and Wahrenberger's units had continued their march to the village of Foni, and had invaded it before dusk. The supply officer also reported on the success of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, which was making

good progress in the Soča Valley, and Rommel described the situation of his units and the relationship with the Leib Regiment's Commander to him, and instructed him to inform Major Sprösser of this as soon as possible. Rommel had no knowledge of whether Schörner's Company or the Leib Regiment's 12<sup>th</sup> Company had occupied Hill 1114, so he thought about how to continue the attack. He did not believe it would be possible to attack without the help of artillery, and was worried because the Leib Regiment's Commander did not want Rommel's units fighting in the front lines.<sup>234</sup>

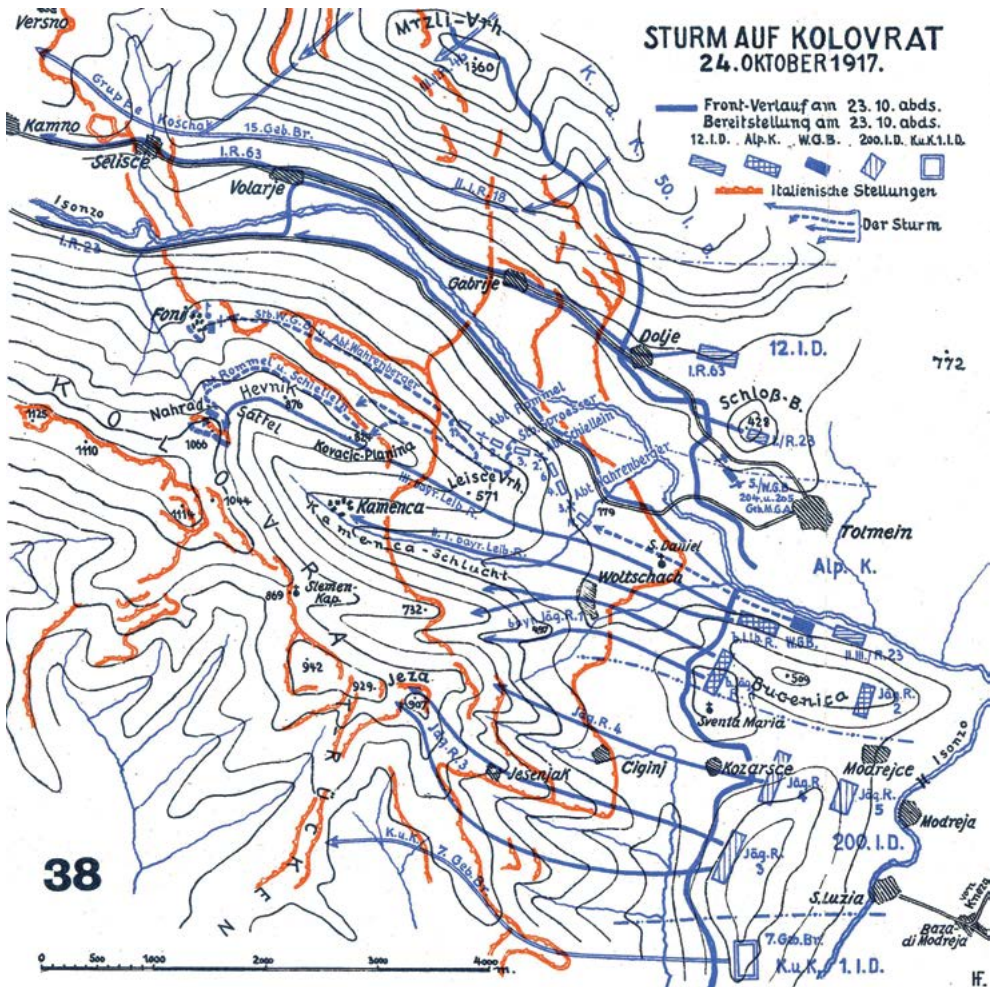
The Leib Regiment planned to attack Hill 1114 from several directions, but the main attack by Second Lieutenant Schörner's 12<sup>th</sup> Company came from the north (where the road is today), along the steepest part of Hill 1114. One of the most important Italian points of defence fell into German hands on the evening of 24 October. Second Lieutenant Schörner was awarded the Pour le Mérite for this successful operation.<sup>235</sup>

Major Sprösser arrived at Rommel's command post at around 5:00am. Rommel informed him of the situation in front of Hill 1114, and of his relationship with the Leib Regiment's Commander, and acquainted him with the plan of attack. Rommel asked him for the support of four companies and two machine gun companies, but Sprösser assigned him only two companies of soldiers and one machine gun company. Sprösser talked to the Leib Regiment's Commander, and they agreed on the delimitation of operations of the two battalions. Rommel's detachment lost five men on the first day of attack, as it encountered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian line of defence in a steep wooded area.

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<sup>234</sup> Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp.16-21; for more information on the operation of Rommel's detachment on the first day of the offensive see: HStAS, M660/200 Bü2, Abteilung Rommel, Gefechtsbericht über die Durchbruchschlacht bei Tolmein, 28 October 1917, pp. 1-3.

<sup>235</sup> For a more detailed description of the occupation of Hill 1114 see: Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Abteilung IV Kriegsarchiv (Bay.KA), BayHStA/Abt.IV ILR (WK) Bd.13 Akt 4, F. Schörner, Kriegsgeschichtliche Darstellung der Teilnahme des III: Batls, k. Inf. – Leib. Regts. Am Durchbruch von Tolmein, Dec 1920, 4, pp. 1617.



Attack on Kolovrat, 24 October 1917<sup>236</sup>

The Italians tried to reorganize and organize a counterattack from Trniški vrh on the first day of the offensive, but were unsuccessful. While the 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment was advancing towards the top of Veliki Špik that day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment was penetrating in the direction of Hills 364 and 607 from the reserve; it successfully climbed the Kolovrat Ridge, and defeated most of the Napoli Brigade. Parts of the 117<sup>th</sup> Division moved towards Volče during the day, but the artillery was advancing slowly due to traffic congestion. Due to the congestion on the left wing of the German Alpine Corps, General Stein

<sup>236</sup>T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, annex.

sent the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment to assist the 200<sup>th</sup> Division in the occupation of Ježa. The German Alpine Corps, with parts of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, successfully broke through the front in the area of operation of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' 19<sup>th</sup> Italian Division, which covered the area between Hlevnik and Podselo.<sup>237</sup>

## The Berrer Corps

The Berrer Corps, which had its headquarters in the village of Ponikve on the Šentviška planota Plateau, occupied the heavily fortified peak of Deveti konfin (Ježa; the westernmost peak at 948m is also called Ježa) with the 200<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> German Divisions, where the command of the Italian 19<sup>th</sup> Division was located west of the peak. Due to the very narrow starting positions, it was impossible for both divisions to attack at the same time, so it was determined that the 200<sup>th</sup> Division would attack first, and the 26<sup>th</sup> Division second. Before the attack, the 200<sup>th</sup> Division had the 3<sup>rd</sup><sup>238</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiments on the first line, stretching from the villages of Kozaršče to Sela pri Volčah, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment on the second line, around the village of Modrejce. The area of the breakthrough was bounded by the peak of Varda (672m), and the Gunjač Stream to the north. The whole area was well fortified, and the Italians had an overview both of what was going on in the valley and on the opposite lower peaks where the enemy positions were located. The northern Ridge was excellently defended, so access to Ježa, across the Ridge, was difficult. Nevertheless, the corps and division commands decided to send two battalions in this direction, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment had to carry out an attack through the village of Fratnik, and occupy the Ježa massif from the south. The units crossed the village of Kozaršče on the way to Čiginj at 7:45am, when the Italian machine guns started firing at them from the rocky ravines north-west of the village. They overcame the attack, but stopped again at the entrance to the valley of the Gunjač Stream. The attack across the Brda hills (Fratnik) was

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<sup>237</sup> HStAS, M660/042, Bü 3, Württembergisches Gebirgs-Batallion nach 1918; L. Galić, B. Marušić: Tolminsko mostišče 1, p. 208.

<sup>238</sup> More about the operation of Colonel von Rango and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment: A. Bauer: Zwei Weisungen Oberst v. Rangos aus der 12. Soča schlacht, *Zeitschrift für Heereskunde*, Nr. 462, Oktober/Dezember, 80. Jahrgang, 2016, pp. 198-202.

successful; the German units continued the attack and occupied Fratnik at around 10:00am. The southern column advanced over the Gredež Ridge, and occupied the village of Ostrožnik at 8:30am. At around 11:00am, the units occupied the saddle (631m) between the peaks of Varda and Martinka. The Bosniaks from the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division had already conquered the top of Varda to the left of the Jäger Regiment. Their biggest problem was their own artillery. The Jäger Regiment then focused on the attack on the peak of Jesenjok (750m), from which the Italian cannons were still firing. The fortified peak of Jesenjok was occupied after the occupation of the summit of Martinka, and the Italian soldiers either fled or surrendered. The units of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division were already below the summit of Ježa, separated from its eastern top of Očna (905m) only by Mali vrh (835m), which is connected to Očna, and where strong Italian artillery was located. Mali vrh was occupied at 11:15am; the peak of Očna and the village of Čanče had fallen by 2:00pm.

The resistance on Ježa was still ongoing, and at around 4:30pm the Italians carried out a counterattack against Očna, which, however, failed. The Italian resistance intensified, its embrace from the north failed, and Colonel von Rango, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment, ordered that Ježa be occupied by night, although he had only two and a half regiments available. The attack was successful, and the Germans captured many Italian prisoners and seized a large number of weapons (99 cannons, 75 machine guns, 45 mortars, and other military equipment). Ježa was defended by units of the Taro and Spezia Brigades, and an Alpine Battalion. After the occupation of Ježa, it was impossible to defend Hill 732 (V Špiku), which enabled the advance of German units. There are differences in the time in the literature with regard to the occupation of Ježa. Italian sources state that Ježa was defended until the early hours of the following day, while German sources write that the occupation was complete in the late afternoon of 24 October. The German Jäger units of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division advanced in the direction of the villages of Kuščarji-Pušno in the late hours of 24 October, where the well-fortified 3<sup>rd</sup> Italian line of defence and a stronghold on the mountain of Globočak were located.<sup>240</sup>

## The Scotti Corps

Two divisions of the Scotti Corps were to attack in the southern part of the Tolmin Bridgehead: the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division, which had been defending the Tolmin Bridgehead since May 1915, and the 5<sup>th</sup> German Division. The Scotti Corps' command post was located on Veliki vrh (1071m), south-east of the village of Kanalski Lom. Its attack order particularly emphasized the self-initiative of junior commanders: "Our attack must break through the enemy's positions at the very beginning, and create a starting position for a successful continuation of the offensive. The requirements to carry out this task must be very high; great initial efforts will save us bloody sacrifices and bring great success. The orders of senior leadership would often be too late due to rapid progress. For this reason, success depends greatly on the maximum independence of junior commanders (within the framework of general guidance), and their rapid response whenever the opportunity arises. All commanders and soldiers must be imbued with these principles, and act in accordance with them."<sup>240</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division was in the first line of attack, and the 5<sup>th</sup> German Division was in the background. Battalions from the Austro-Hungarian 57<sup>th</sup> Division, which operated within the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army, were deployed between the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division and the Italians in the Mali vrh-Hoje area. That day, the battalions fought against the units of the Italian 65<sup>th</sup> Division. The units of the Scotti Corps reached their starting positions at the last minute, and even missed the beginning of the offensive. Most of the cannons and mortars did not reach their starting positions due to the lack of horses, so the Scotti Corps had to attack without artillery support.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division had to penetrate to the west in the direction of the peak of Čemponi, and to the south to help attack the northern wing of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army. The 7<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade was given the task of occupying Čemponi and penetrating towards Avško, north of the mountain of Čičer.

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<sup>239</sup> A. Bauer: *Zwei Weisungen Oberst v. Rangos aus der 12. Soča schlacht*, pp. 198-202; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 210-211; M. Simić: *Po sledih soške fronte*, pp. 213-216.

<sup>240</sup> L. Galić: *Cvetje – Mengore: v viharju vojne 1915-1917*, p. 225.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Mountain Brigade was on the left wing; it was to cross the village of Sela pri Volčah and occupy Žibli vrh (606m), Javor (555m), and Grad vrh (696m), and then descend to the village of Doblar, and occupy the bridges near Ročinj and Log. The division attacked without light machine guns, and with several mountain cannons and mortars. Parts of the assault troops broke through to the edges of the village of Volčanski Ruti during the artillery fire. Parts of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade initially encountered resistance in the valley of the Ušnik stream, as many enemy positions were not destroyed. Nevertheless, the soldiers occupied the Ridge of Čempon at around 9:30am, and Žibli vrh at 10:15am; Javor fell soon afterwards, while the summit of Varda was occupied at around 12 noon. The Dalmatian 37<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment attacked Grad vrh at 4:00pm, and the second Italian line of defence soon afterwards. The advance parties experienced strong resistance on the fortified line of defence between Avško and Bizjak at around 3:30pm, so the attack lasted until night fell. In the evening, only the troops on Globočak (809m) were still resisting. The Austro-Hungarian forces captured more than 4600 Italian soldiers, seized 77 cannons, 32 machine guns, and a large amount of military material. The Alpini from the 10<sup>th</sup> group resisted poorly, and the entire Italian 19<sup>th</sup> Division was destroyed; its commander, General Villani, committed suicide. Due to the devastation, General Capello transferred command of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' divisions to the 24<sup>th</sup> Corps, which withstood and repulsed weaker attacks of parts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army during the day, but withdrew to the Čičer-Ročinj-Grad line (575m) by order of the army commander. The 5<sup>th</sup> German Division advanced in the footsteps of the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division, and found itself overlooking the strong Italian resistance at the exit of the railway tunnel at today's dam of the Doblar hydro power plant at around 9:30am. It crossed the Soča River near Podselo, and headed towards Kum (912m). The 8<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment arrived at the top of Varda at around 8:00pm, and was joined by the 52<sup>nd</sup> Regiment at around 10:00pm. On the first day of the offensive, the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division captured 4600 prisoners, and seized 77 cannons and 32 machine guns, but failed to occupy the heavily fortified and well-defended Globočak, or penetrate to Kostanjevica.<sup>241</sup>

<sup>241</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 211-212; M. Simić: *Po sledih soške fronte*, p. 217.

## Tasks of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army

The Italian 24<sup>th</sup> Corps had numerous artillery positions on the Banjšice Plateau. By order of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's Commander, heavy artillery was moved to the key defence line after 15 October, so that on 21<sup>st</sup> October the batteries were already directed at new targets. On the decisive night of 23-24 October, the 24<sup>th</sup> Corps' artillery fired heavily at the Austro-Hungarian positions from which the infantry could have attacked. On 24 October, the Austro-Hungarian units carried out several minor attacks; they, however, were successfully repulsed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army was not required to attack the Italians on the Banjšice Plateau; these attacks were merely demonstrative and misleading, and their purpose was to conceal the true location of the front breakthrough. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army had to maintain pressure to prevent manoeuvring with the reserves. A long stay of the Italians on Banjšice increased the chances of cutting off their routes of retreat from the north.<sup>242</sup>

The strongest attack was experienced by three divisions of Badoglio's 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, which were stationed on the Kal-Lom Plateau. They were attacked by units of the Scotti Corps and units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army (the Cossack Corps). The first Austro-Hungarian attacks, at around 8:00am, were repulsed at Mešnjak and on Hill 645. At around 8:50am, attackers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mountain Brigade of the 60<sup>th</sup> Division broke through the first Italian line of defence, and began to advance along Vogršček; they then went along the bank of the Soča River past the village of Spodnji Log and the entrance to the Soča Valley (the village of Široka njiva), in the direction of Avče. The Italians counterattacked, but lost Hill 549. Part of the main line north of Široka njiva was threatened by the fall of Javor above the right bank of the Soča River, as there were cannons and machine guns there, which had to protect these positions with flanking fire. The Austro-Hungarian attack was repulsed at Testeni and the base south of Hoje, and the line of defence in the area of the Italian 64<sup>th</sup> Division was breached, so the Italians had to withdraw to the Robi-Breg line. The fighting on the first day was not decisive; some positions were passed from side to side several times, but there was no strategic breakthrough. The crisis arose in the

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<sup>242</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 212.



evening, when three Italian divisions lost contact with the corps command, and noticed that crowds of unarmed people, livestock and artillery teams were rolling along the road by the Soča River, from Podselo towards Kanal. In accordance with the order of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's Command, General Caviglia ordered his divisions to withdraw to the key line of defence on 24 October at 10:00pm. To secure the belated withdrawal of divisions, Caviglia stopped the withdrawal of the 49<sup>th</sup> Division, and assigned it a new course of action for the following day. The Austro-Hungarian units noticed the retreat, and mingled among the retreating columns with their assault groups.

On the morning of 25 October, a crisis arose at the mouth of the Avšček and Soča Rivers, as four divisions retreated towards Kanal and Anhovo, and the Austro-Hungarian patrols mingled among them. It was impossible for them to stop at the northern part of the key line of defence. The Austro-Hungarian units invaded the Kanalski vrh Basin on 25 October; the mountain of Golek was lost, and the positions south of Jelenk could only be temporarily fortified. On the night of 25 October, the Italians destroyed the bridges below Javor and in Dobljar, and soon afterwards the bridges near Ročinj and Log. In order to secure the left flank, and prevent the penetration of the Austro-Hungarian units in the direction of Kanal, General Caviglia deployed the Treviso Brigade to the Ridge of Globočak, and across the mountain of Čičer to Ročinj; and a regiment of the Palermo Brigade along the bank of the Soča River. At around noon on 25 October, three of Badoglio's former divisions were ordered to deploy on the Globočak-Marijino Celje line above the Kanal-Kuk line (711m). Major events in the north led to constant and confused changes in the army command's orders. At around 3:00pm, Capello ordered the entire 24<sup>th</sup> Corps to move to the right bank of the Soča River, and deploy its units from Ročinj to Plave. Most of the batteries were lost during the withdrawal, as they had no towing vehicles, and the routes were closed. On the evening of 25 October, Italian units were ordered to leave their positions on Kolovrat, and move to the mouth of the Idrija River and to Pradielis (*Slo. Ter*). The Austro-Hungarian units arrived in Ročinj, and headed towards Kanal. On the night of 26 October, General Caviglia was ordered to defend the positions on the Korada-Planina-Plave-Paljevo-Kobilek line with three brigades (Livorno, Venezia, Teramo). All the divisions of the 24<sup>th</sup> Corps and three former divisions of the

27<sup>th</sup> Corps withdrew behind this line of defence towards Friuli on 26 October. They suffered considerable losses during the withdrawal, especially the Roma Brigade. The 49<sup>th</sup> Division, which protected their right flank, also suffered losses. The last Italian soldier left the left bank of the Soča River, north of Gorizia (*Slo. Gorica*) near Plave, on the evening of 27 October, when the order to withdraw to the Tagliamento River reached Korada. The attackers captured Gorizia on 28 October, and the Austro-Hungarian and German units reached and crossed the former state border along its entire length on 29 October.<sup>243</sup>

The Austro-Hungarian and German units experienced great success on the first day of the offensive, especially the Stein Corps with its penetration, while the advances of the Berrer and Scotti Corps went according to expectations. The exception was the Krauss Corps, from which the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's leadership had expected more. Its units, however, penetrated the most demanding terrain of the Upper Soča Region. The isolation between the north and south wings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was almost broken; the attackers spread to the right bank of the Soča River; and important Italian points of defence were liberated. Nothing was yet decided at the end of the first day; the south wing had to occupy Kolovrat and Matajur, and the north wing had to occupy Stol. If they broke through the blockade at Žaga the following day and occupied Stol, the relative failures at Rombon and Vršič would not be significant. The failed actions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army in the northern part of the Banjšice Plateau were not critical, as the only thing that mattered was that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army fixed the enemy forces and prevented the transfer of the reserves.<sup>244</sup>

## **Italian defence on the first day of the offensive**

Much of the Italian artillery fell silent on 24 October, and only a few machine guns were active, occasionally firing blindly through the valley, where there was fog and rain. Most of the Italian soldiers in the trenches on the first lines of defence lost their lives, and the rest quickly surrendered to the attackers. The

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

280<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Foggia Brigade was sent from the corps reserve to Žaga on the night of 23-24 October by order of the Italian Supreme Command, in order to reinforce the 2<sup>nd</sup> Alpine Group which had to defend the Žaga Ravine. During the day, the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' commander, General Cavaciocchi, assigned the 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiment to defend Žaga, but the commander of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, General Arrighi, refused the help, and the 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiment were captured the next day. The 50<sup>th</sup> Division's commander was convinced that the positions at Žaga could not be defended, but the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' commander considered this naturally strong and fortified position to be invincible, and believed it should be defended with all forces. The Division's commander never received the order of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' commander; the defence was weak; and it only took one attacking battalion to break through it in the end.<sup>245</sup>

The Italian 7<sup>th</sup> Corps was supposed to be in the rear of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, but found itself in direct contact with the attackers after the breakthrough of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division at Kobarid. Its 3<sup>rd</sup> Division occupied the Kolovrat Ridge west of Hill 1114 as early as 23 October; the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division was deployed in the area from Cividale to the southern slopes of Matajur. All calls for help from other corps went unanswered. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was completely powerless and passive, and hesitated to organize a counterattack, which it only carried out the next day, when it was too late. The first news Capello received in the morning was reassuring. Artillery fire was to be mostly aimed at the second front line, communications, and individual artillery positions.

News of the enemy's offensive was slow to reach the Italian Supreme Command and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's headquarters. At 10:00am, field reports at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's headquarters reported that heavy artillery fire had begun at night and was still continuing, but there was no cause for alarm as there was no news from the battlefield. Cadorna had little information, so he was still unsure of where most of the attack would be directed: whether it would be the upper or the lower reaches of the Soča River, or in the direction of Trentino. He sent a message to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army at 9:30am that the Ježa-Globočak line should be defended, and then asked the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army how many weapons it could send to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army if the main effort of the offensive was further south, in the 3<sup>rd</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

Army's area. Capello began to gather reserves at 11:40am, and ordered the 47<sup>th</sup> Division's brigade to join the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps on the Matajur-Globočak line of defence; at 12 noon he ordered the 53<sup>rd</sup> Division to move to Stupizza (*Slo. Stupica*). Capello sent the Vicenza Brigade to the Nadiža Ravine, and replaced it by the Massa Carrara Brigade in the positions around Monte Purgessimo. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's left wing commander, General Montuori, was given the task of defending the strategically important line of defence Stol-Matajur-Kuk-Trniški vrh. Cadorna recognized the importance of Punta di Montemaggiore, and at 6:30pm ordered the Zona Carnia command to occupy this Ridge and block the Učje (*It. Uccia*) and Beli potok (*It. Val di Riobianco*) Valleys. The Zona Carnia Command replied that it had sent reinforcements there, but they would not be able to reach the positions before 26 October. Capello also ordered the occupation of Stol (*It. Gran Monte*) and Punta di Montemaggiore with units of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>246</sup>

Capello only received news from the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps at 1:00pm, saying that the enemy had captured Bovec and was advancing towards Žaga, and across Selišče by the Soča River towards Kobarid. The Italian Supreme Command had received very little information by 2:30pm, saying there were no changes in the area of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps; the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps reported that the bombing was continuing and that communications had been cut off. Reports also stated that some Italian units were carrying out counterattacks in a bid to regain the lost territories.<sup>247</sup>

Badoglio was the first to deliver detailed information on the enemy's offensive. He reported on the battles of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division, saying that the enemy was occupying positions in the vicinity of Čemponi and Varda. Badoglio, who had asked for additional help, reported at 4:00pm that the enemy was breaking through to Vogrinki south of Ježa, while he had not received any messages from the 19<sup>th</sup> Division. He also reported that he had lost all communications, and could not make contact with anyone. Cadorna left his headquarters in Udine in the afternoon, and went to Capello to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's headquarters in Cividale. A number of reserves were activated after the talks. The 60<sup>th</sup> Division

<sup>246</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, p. 322; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 308; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 216-217. J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 51.

<sup>247</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, pp. 240, 286.

and the 7<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group were directed to Breginj in order to block the route from Kobarid to Tarcento, and on to the Tagliamento River; the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Divisions headed to the area south of Tarcento; units of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Divisions went to the area south of Cividale; units of the 30<sup>th</sup> Division went to the area between Castelmonte and Korada; and field artillery regiments and 28 medium-calibre batteries were directed from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. The Italians began to relocate their reserves, but they mostly reached the designated positions too late. Three divisions from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army's area, and two more from Trentino were sent to help. Based on the reports received on the first day of the offensive, General Cadorna decided to withdraw the Italian army from the first lines of defence on the Banjšice Plateau, and carry out preparations for a possible withdrawal across the Soča River. At 10:00pm he sent an order for each army to fortify its part of the front at the Tagliamento River. Three lines of defence were determined: in the entire area of Punta di Montemaggiore in the north, two on Globočak, and one on Korada in the south. Only remnants of the 34<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions gathered on Stol on the night of 24 to 25 October, except the Potenza Brigade; the 53<sup>rd</sup> Division gathered in the Nadiža Valley near Stupizza. Matajur was defended by the Salerno Brigade, and the Bersaglieri Brigade was to defend the upper course of the Idrija River. The main points of defence were still in Italian hands: Stol, Matajur, Korada and Globočak. The problem was that the Italian high-level commands no longer had control over or contact with their subordinate units; they were unaware of the low morale of their units; their army reserves were poorly deployed; and the oversize of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army made command difficult. The Austro-German attack completely paralyzed all communications between the higher and lower Italian commands and their subordinate units. On the evening of 24 October, Cadorna ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies to defend the Tagliamento River, and sent a warning to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies to consolidate their front lines and prepare all forces which could be sent to help on the Soča Front.<sup>248</sup>

<sup>248</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 217; L'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito: *L'Esercito Italiano*, p. 330.

An example of poor communication and non-compliance with orders between superior and subordinate commands was the order of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's commander to the commander of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps. The 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' commander, General Badoglio, was given the task of defending the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian line of defence, but disregarded the order. His subordinate divisions completely failed to carry out a defence. The 19<sup>th</sup> Division, with the Spezia and Taro Brigades, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group on the line of the church of St. Daniel-Volče-Čiginj failed to deter the German attack. The Taro Brigade in the vicinity of Volče, the Spezia Brigade around Čiginj, and the Alpini on the Čemponi-Grad Ridge failed to defend themselves successfully. Badoglio lost all contact with his subordinate commands soon after the beginning of the offensive, and had no control over what was going on at the front. In one report, Capello apologized for the complete silence of the corps artillery; one of his officers, whom Capello had sent to Ostri kras (*It. Monte Ostra Cras*), allegedly did not hear his machine gun fire. Despite poor information about the real situation on the front, at 4:00pm Badoglio ordered the Puglia Brigade to secure the Idrija River Valley, and occupy the Srednje-Avško-the mountain of Čičer line; at the same time, he demanded help of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps' 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in defending Ježa. He informed Capello of this, and admitted that he had no connection with his subordinate commands. Capello claims in his records that Badoglio could not have known what was going on, as he was not at his command post. He was searched for in vain in the mill near Klinc in the vicinity of Kambreško, and was finally found in the village of Lig above Kanal.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup>J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 52.

## SEIZING THE KEY TERRAIN

### Tasks of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Armies

After a wet and foggy first day of the offensive, the weather improved the next day; it was a beautiful sunny day, and the fog only lingered in some parts of the valley. The objective of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command was to conquer the key Ridges of Kolovrat, Matajur and Stol. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army corps and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army received orders that day. The Krauss Corps were to occupy Stol, descend towards Breginj, reach the Učje Valley, and advance westwards on both sides. It had to break through to the area of Resiutta in the valley of Fella, and occupy the line Punta di Montemaggiore-Monte Cavallo-Javor-Monte Carnizza. The Stein, Berrer and Scotti Corps were to occupy the key peaks such as Globočak, Kum, Monte Ioanaz, Monte Mladesena, Monte Purgessimo, and the hills around Castelmonte.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army was given a clear path for major offensive operations, and was to occupy Korada, but the reserves of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army could not successfully approach the front that day due to the amount of traffic. Nevertheless, some units approached the new front line: the 13<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division advanced from Slap ob Idrijci to Most na Soči and to Volče; the 4<sup>th</sup> Division advanced to Reka near Cerkno; and the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division advanced to Kneža. New German artillery joined them in further advance, as their divisional artillery was hopelessly stuck in the traffic.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 221, 228; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 56.

## The Krauss Corps

The Krauss Corps' units successfully advanced from Žaga along the Učje Valley and the Stol Ridge. The main objective of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division was to conquer Stol and Punta di Montemaggiore. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division, with battalions of the Imperial Rifle Regiments, attacked Stol in the early hours of the morning; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to occupy the mountain of Hum on the right side. The objective of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which was positioned in the middle, was to conquer the peak of Prvi Hum or Murna glava; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, which was situated on the left, was directed to Pass 1405. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Tyrolean Imperial Rifle Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion from the Edelweiss Division had to follow in the footsteps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, whose units had accidentally found a gap in the Italian defence, and penetrated the first Italian base. The commander left the crew to the oncoming troops, and advanced to a higher point with several soldiers. There were 14 such high points or bases, arranged in a graduated offset without interconnection, stretching to the peak of Prvi Hum. Due to heavy fighting and exertion, only about fifteen soldiers arrived at the 14<sup>th</sup> base; the rest fell, or were wounded or exhausted. Fifteen soldiers were not enough to occupy the last base, but the commander knew he must not give the Italians any time to reorganize.<sup>251</sup>

Fortunately, another unit of the Tyrolean Imperial Rifle Regiment was in the area, which was originally intended to occupy Punta di Montemaggiore, and it attacked the Italian positions and occupied Prvi Hum. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion advanced towards Hum. The soldiers soon encountered well-defended Italian positions, which they successfully occupied, and captured about 800 Italian soldiers. The battalion reached the summit of Hum at 12:30pm. At around 1:00pm, all three battalions were at the same height, and they began advancing towards the long whaleback Ridge of Stol. They reached the line at an altitude of 500m below the Ridge at around 5:00pm. Meanwhile, the 43<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Brigade ascended Stol, and its 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment was in the advance party. Around midnight, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was ordered to assist the Imperial Riflemen in

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<sup>251</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 58; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 224-225; M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 219.



attacking the Ridge of Stol. After occupying the pass and the Ridge, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion attacked the summit of Stol in the early hours of the morning on 26 October. The effect of occupying Stol, which was defended by the 271<sup>st</sup> Regiment of the Potenza Brigade with the remnants of the 43<sup>rd</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions, was quickly felt. The Italians began to withdraw from Rombon in the morning.<sup>252</sup>

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Edelweiss Division had many problems due to deep snow and an effective Italian defence, which prevented them from occupying Prevala. Italian cannons fired from Prevala into the Bovec Basin for two days. Most of the division advanced to Žaga, then turned into the Učje Valley and the southern slopes of the Kanin Mountains. By evening, they had occupied Skutnik (*It. Monte Guarda*), where they seized 18 cannons and captured 300 Italian soldiers. The division advanced towards Resia, but soon came to a standstill because the road across Nizki vrh was not drawn on the Austro-Hungarian maps. At the end of the day, 300 Italians were captured on the Tanamea Pass, and four cannons were seized. The Tyrolean Imperial Riflemen's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion headed across the village of Muzec (*It. Musi*) in the direction of Venzone, and was joined by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion after the latter had descended from Breški Jalovec (*It. Punta di Montemaggiore*). The 216<sup>th</sup> Brigade cleared the Kanin Mountains that day and the next, and captured 1900 prisoners and seized four cannons. The division's headquarters arrived in Žaga in the evening.

The 55<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division occupied Krasji vrh and Planina Jama on 25 October. The Italians withdrew from the mountain of Polovnik, so the division was able to descend to Drežnica and Kobarid. The division moved to the corps reserve at the end of the day, and rested in the area of the villages of Drežniške Ravne and Magozd. The first units arrived in the village of Staro selo that day. As many as 4000 Italian soldiers, 70 cannons, and about 1000 carthorses were captured. The German Jäger Division arrived from the Trenta Valley to the Srpenica-Trnovo ob Soči line.<sup>253</sup>

<sup>252</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 225.

<sup>253</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 225; M. Simić: *Po sledih soške fronte*, p. 219.

## The Stein Corps

The 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division was sent in the direction of the mountains of Robič and Mija, and directed to the top of Ivanec. Its 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade advanced along the slopes of Krn in the early morning hours, reaching its summit, while the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade reached Robič in the evening. Its advance party, the 1<sup>st</sup> Bosnian-Herzegovinian Regiment, began to climb Mija. To its right, the 18<sup>th</sup> Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion advanced to Breginjski kot and occupied Borjana, then advanced towards Podbela, where it met the Krauss Corps' 22<sup>nd</sup> Division, which was already descending from Stol. Most of the units which spent the night in Kobarid were ordered to attack the northern slopes of Ivanec the next day, together with several units of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, starting at the Robedišče-Ljubija (Monte Lubia) line.<sup>254</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division clashed with Italian troops in the early morning hours in the areas of Robič, Kred and Staro selo. It advanced along the Nadiža Valley towards Cividale, and reached Stupizza in the evening. Although the Italian soldiers fled the defence line near Staro selo without a fight, they frantically tried to entrench themselves on the slopes of Matajur and Stol, and in the Soča Valley. The day before, two battalions of the Silesian 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, and one battalion of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiment had been just before the village of Golobi in the direction of Livek. The Italians tried to counterattack several times there, but were unsuccessful. Units of the German Alpine Corps advanced along the Ridge of Kolovrat at around 4:00pm, and threatened the Italian flank at Livek. The 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment successfully penetrated from Robič to Stupizza, and inflicted heavy losses on the assisting Italian units. Major Eichholz's men attacked Golobi and Livek at around 5:00pm. The Italian units either fled or were captured. On 24 October, the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division alone captured 10,000 Italian soldiers. The Italians sent two Bersaglieri regiments, two mortar batteries, and one howitzer and mountain cannon battery to defend Livek and the road pass. Matajur was defended by units of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division, which carried out several unsuccessful counterattacks against Schnieber's

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<sup>254</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 56; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 221.

unit. Schnieber, from the 12<sup>th</sup> Division, stated on 25 October that he had not reached the summit of Matajur, but the top of Visoka glava (*It. Monte della Colonna*), but the 12<sup>th</sup> Division's command sent a message to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command that a member of its unit had conquered Matajur. Schnieber was later awarded the Pour le Mérite for this false achievement.<sup>255</sup>

## **The German Alpine Corps and the penetration of Rommel's detachment from Hill 1066 to Jevšček**

The German Alpine Corps and its subordinate Württemberg Mountain Battalion and Leib Regiment had a strong enemy in front of them after the occupation of Hill 1114. The enemy was positioned along the entire western Ridge of Kolovrat and was persistently defending themselves. The battalions that had remained at the Za Gradom and Solarji Passes since the previous evening attacked again before morning. They were accompanied by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment, which came across Hlevnik to the Kamnica Valley. Parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion which had been left behind at Foni reached Hill 1114 at around 3:00am. The 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment did not reach the Sleme chapel until around 11:30am, because the last base on the Ridge of V Špiku only fell at 8:15am. The Leib Regiment thus had to attack alone along the Ridge of Kolovrat. Italian counterattacks had been going on since the morning, but were successfully halted by units of the German Alpine Corps. The counterattacks ceased at around 10:00am, and the Italian soldiers began to surrender en masse. The Leib and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment's battalions advanced rapidly; they only encountered points of resistance in isolated cases, where the Italians defended themselves spasmodically.

On that day, Rommel's detachment, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company and the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company, left the western part of the rocky Ridge at Hill 1066, and descended in a north-westerly direction. As they moved, they were spotted by the Italian troops who wounded several men, so they quickly took cover in

<sup>255</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 56; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 221-222.

some bushes where they encountered the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company. In the given situation, Rommel presented all his company commanders with a plan to attack the 3<sup>rd</sup> Italian line of defence. He himself intended to move down the steep slope to the west, settle 2000m from the fighting at Hill 1114, and then look for opportunities to attack. He sent Second Lieutenant Ludwig's 2<sup>nd</sup> Company forward as an advance party, which was followed by the headquarters, and then the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company. They moved quietly and covertly from Hill 1066, covering more than 2000m west as the crow flies in an hour. The Italian units, which were 200 to 400m above them, did not detect the movement and did not fire a single shot. The only shots heard were from Hill 1114. Soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company discovered sleeping Italians about 200m below the Italian positions, and captured them without a shot being fired. These men represented the advance Italian guard with 40 men and two machine guns.<sup>256</sup>

Rommel then intended to occupy positions on Kolovrat, as the chances of approaching the obstacles above his troops were favourable. The deepest part of the dip was not visible, so Rommel sent the prisoners to the end of the column, and ordered the advance party to climb out of the dip to the Italian obstacles, and prepare Rommel's unit for invasion. A small group of men was sent to examine the condition of the Italian barbed wire entanglements, and the signal troops established contact with the command post of Major Sprösser, who closely monitored Rommel's advance. They informed him of the Leib Regiment's engagements with the Italians, and offered him help. Because of the silence in the Italian positions, Rommel decided to occupy them. All the units climbed up the slope, overcame the barbed wire entanglements, and attacked the Italian positions. The Italians did not expect the attack – they were caught during their morning wash. Rommel's units conquered the pass from which the Livek-Kuk-Hill 1114-Kraj (*It. Crai*) road was clearly visible to the north. The Italian troops did not notice their invasion, so Rommel quickly ordered his men to push east and then west. Junior Sergeant Spadinger and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company's machine gun group bypassed the Italian positions on the northern slope from the east, closed the high-altitude road in the same direction, and

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<sup>256</sup>E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 24-25.

covered the backs of Rommel's units which were advancing westward. Second Lieutenant Ludwig and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company bypassed the Italian positions on the northern slope to the west; Rommel, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, and the machine gun company went along the high-altitude road to the west; and Second Lieutenant Streicher and his patrol took over the protection of the units.

All Rommel's units then began to fulfill their tasks. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company's squads, under the command of Second Lieutenant Ludwig, occupied the Italian positions without any major difficulties, and the Italian soldiers surrendered without resistance. Rommel's units also advanced successfully along the high-altitude road, despite the strong Italian positions above them. The first fight broke out when the Streicher patrol reached the pass 300m east of Hill 1192, when they were hit by Italian fire from the southern slopes of Hill 1192; the patrol had to retreat to the northern slopes of Hill 1192. Heavy machine gun fire stopped the advance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company and the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company along the high-altitude road. Parts of the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company also took part in the battle, but the Italians were too strong. At this point, Rommel estimated that an attack on both sides of the road across the steep and exposed southern slopes of the Kolovrat Ridge towards Hill 1192 would be extremely difficult; moreover, his view was limited as he could not appear on the bare top, to the right of the road. Fire immediately erupted from several machine guns from Hill 1192. Rommel tried to find out whether the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company was holding back the Italians. If the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company was defeated, the Italians would quickly regain the lost positions on the northern slope, cut off other parts of the units, and free the prisoners. At that moment Rommel felt it necessary to close the road to the west, and help the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company as quickly as possible. The shortest route north across the bare peaks was closed due to machine gun fire, and the Italian fire closed the attack on both sides of the road to the west, towards Hill 1192, so there was no hope of success. Rommel sought a different solution. He ordered a machine gun platoon and several soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company to close the high-altitude road to the west, and hurried down the road towards the pass, 800m east of Hill 1192, with the remainder of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company and a machine gun company. The densely overgrown path prevented the Italians in the east from noticing this movement, so Rommel was able to attack them. He soon reached the pass with his units, leaving some

to hold back the Italian troops on the east side. The remainder of the soldiers advanced westward along the Italian positions which had been cleared by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company. Then, some 100m before Rommel, a loud battle roar was heard near the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, so Rommel ordered the remaining companies to advance rapidly. He then surveyed the site and assessed the situation from a top 350m east of Hill 1192.<sup>257</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company held its position on the north-eastern slope, and was surrounded by an overpowering Italian reserve battalion from the west, south and east. Fifty metres away were the fronts of the Italian units. Behind the back of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company were broad, high Italian barbed wire entanglements, which made it impossible to retreat to the northern slope. It became clear to Rommel that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company could only be recovered by a sudden attack from the remainder of the detachment from the side and into the enemy's rear. He gathered the fronts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, and soldiers of the Machine Gun Company. He briefly explained the situation to them, so that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company's soldiers secretly prepared themselves to attack the enemy in front of them. The machine gun crew was preparing itself in a dip on the right, and most of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company was prepared to attack on the left. The Italian soldiers, ready to attack the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, were already rising 100m in front of Rommel's units, so Rommel quickly gave the signal for attack to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company and the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company. The Italians halted the attack on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, and tried to turn towards the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company rose during this time, and began to attack. The entire Italian battalion with 12 officers and 500 soldiers surrendered on the pass, 300m northeast of Hill 1192. Despite this great success, Lance Corporal Kiefner and Junior Sergeant Kneule lost their lives; this, however, did not shake the combat morale of the soldiers.<sup>258</sup>

At 9:15am Rommel occupied part of the positions on Kolovrat, a breadth of 800m from Hill 1192 to 800m east of the summit. The Italians still fired at the heights occupied by Rommel's units, and the Italian artillery batteries on Hum and to the west noticed the invasion of Kolovrat, and the fighting for Hill 1192. Grenades forced them to seek cover on the northern slopes. Rommel

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-29.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

did not initially consider continuing the attack, as he had not yet received any help; at the same time, it was necessary to keep what had been gained. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company and half of the Machine Gun Company occupied the western part of Hill 1192; the eastern direction, 800m east of Hill 1192, was closed by Spadinger and his platoon; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company and part of the Machine Gun Company remained in the occupied positions on the north-eastern slope of Hill 1192, and were available to Rommel. Rommel examined the position from the top of Hill 1192. The most dangerous course seemed an action directed to the west, in the direction of Kuk (1243m), as a large part of the Italian machine guns were aimed at Rommel's troops from there. Soon, heavy Italian fire was directed at the soldiers from the eastern slopes of Kuk. An Italian artillery group was active in the south, on Hum; there was lively traffic of trucks driving in columns in both directions on the high-altitude road leading from Cividale across Hum. Concentrated battle groups approached the front on both sides of the road. Rommel could see the entire Ridge of Kolovrat to the east which was slowly descending to Hill 1114. He saw the build-up of strong Italian units on the southern and south-western slopes of Hill 1114. It seemed that the Italians intended to attack there, as they were bringing in reserves in columns of trucks, unloading them on the western slopes of Hill 1114. Italian forces were also visible along the high-altitude road and the summits above, advancing from the east towards Rommel. It seemed that the Italians would attack from two sides at once.<sup>259</sup>

The Italian attack worried Rommel, so he decided to wait for Major Sprösser to arrive with most of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion to Hill 1192; he then intended to attack the Italian positions on Kuk. He informed the Württemberg Mountain Battalion of his position, and his intention to attack Kuk. He asked for the support of two heavy batteries, and was connected to an artillery officer of the artillery group near Tolmin, who promised him support. They agreed on an effective fire by both batteries between 11:15am and 11:45am on the wide eastern slopes of Kuk and on the positions on its northern slopes. Rommel protected the infantry by placing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company's light machine guns and the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company on the northern

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

and southern slopes of Hill 1192, which were unprotected by the enemy from the direction of Kuk. The task of these units was to support the strike of the small attack units, and to keep the Italian enemy at the foot of the mountain. Major Sprösser arrived at the pass east of Hill 1192 at 10:30am, and Rommel informed him of the position and the plan of attack. Sprösser assigned Second Lieutenant Hohl's 6<sup>th</sup> Company to attack in the direction of Hill 1114 and to occupy positions on the Ridge of Kolovrat; he also approved Rommel's attack on Kuk, and additionally assigned him the 4<sup>th</sup> Company and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Companies.<sup>260</sup>

The entire group, with six machine guns, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company under the command of Second Lieutenant Ludwig, was prepared to attack Kuk on the southern and northern slopes of Hill 1192 at 11:00am. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company's attack group stayed on the northern slopes of Hill 1192, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company's attack group was prepared to attack Kuk at the battery positions on the southern slopes. The task of these two attack groups was to occupy the pass between Kuk and Hill 1192 under the protection of artillery fire and machine guns, and then advance to the Italian positions on Kuk on the northern slopes, or across the dips on the southern slopes. Rommel wanted to test the Italian positions with these attack groups; he also had the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Companies, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Companies available, hidden on the pass east of Hill 1192. He intended to use these units (given the success of the attack groups) on the northern and southern slopes.

Shortly before the attack, the front of the Leib Regiment arrived at the pass east of Hill 1192. It followed the same path as Rommel's units, below the positions on Hill 1114 and the pass 800m east of Hill 1192, due to heavy Italian fire coming from the positions north-east of Hill 1114. It encountered 1500 Italian prisoners along the way, who had been captured by Rommel's units.

German batteries from the Tolmin area began firing at the Italian positions on the eastern slope of Kuk at 11:15am; they also began to attack with the machine guns of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on Hill 1192. The Italians responded fiercely to the German attack from Kuk, although they

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.



were hindered by the German grenades. They began with artillery fire from Hum, but were aiming poorly at the German positions on the southern slopes of Hill 1192. Meanwhile, Second Lieutenant Ludwig's attack group on the northern slopes was slowly moving uphill despite strong Italian resistance. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Company's attack group advanced from the artillery positions along the road on the south side of Hill 1192, and reached the pass between Hill 1192 and Kuk. It was threatened by its own artillery, so the group quickly rose against the Italian forces on the southern slopes of Kuk. The German artillery fired well and hit the Italian positions; machine gun fire was concentrated in the area closest to the Italian units. The attack group soon came in front of the Italian trenches at a distance of hand grenades, and the first Italian soldiers had already begun to surrender after the calls.

At this point, Rommel estimated that it was the right time to activate his four companies. He issued the order for the southern attack group to climb Kuk and capture the Italian prisoners, while Rommel was to attack with his four companies along the southern slopes of Kuk.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Company, the 4<sup>th</sup> Company, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, and the Machine Gun Company followed the headquarters at an accelerated pace along a hidden mountain road; a group of machine gunners on Hill 1192 was to guard the attack with heavy fire. If the Italians on Kuk had been attentive, they would have noticed movement below their positions, but they were focused on the German machine guns on Hill 1192, and on hand grenade fighting on the northern slopes. Rommel's unit quickly reached the pass between Hill 1192 and Kuk, which was in a blind spot facing the Italian fire on Kuk. Meanwhile, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company's attack group on the slope captured another 100 Italian soldiers. Rommel was informed from the rear that parts of the Leib Regiment would join his units on the mountain road. The strength of Rommel's units thus exceeded the Regiment's strength, having a depth of operation of two to three kilometres.<sup>261</sup>

Summarizing the operation of Rommel's detachment on the mountain of Kuk, we can conclude that the Italian units on the eastern slopes of Kuk were nailed to the ground by the machine gun and artillery fire. Rommel at that moment

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<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

was in doubt as whether to encircle and attack the troops on Kuk or to advance along the high-altitude road and attack further. He decided to advance along the road, and set himself the goal of conquering the village of Livške Ravne. The Italians above the road did not notice the movement, and Rommel's units occasionally encountered unsuspecting Italian enemies standing in groups on the road or approaching them. They were completely taken aback by the sudden arrival of Rommel's units, and were easily captured by the German troops, and sent disarmed along the column. There was still gunfire above them on the slope between the Italian units on Kuk and the German units on Hill 1192. The Italians expected a broad German attack across the slopes of Hill 1192, and completely neglected the role of the high-altitude road leading to Livške Ravne.

Rommel's units advanced rapidly and reached Livške Ravne at 12:00pm. There, the Italian troops dispersed right in front of them, and fled into the valley towards Livek and Topolovo (*It. Topolo*). Many Italian units could be seen in Livek and its surroundings, and there was lively traffic in both directions on the Livek-Sovodenj road. A loud battle roar was heard north of Livek, as Major Eichholz's units resisted the strong Italian forces, which wanted to penetrate to Kobarid across Livek, and attack the flank of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division. Rommel was soon joined by the remaining companies, and saw the opportunity to continue the penetration. He estimated that it no longer made sense to fight the Italian forces on Kuk, as they were already fighting with parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, and were no longer dangerous to the German penetration.

He also determined that the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division would probably be successful in attacking the Italian forces in Livek, and that his units could support the attack with fire, as the chances of approaching the concentrated Italian forces were favourable. He finally judged that the rugged wooded terrain on the eastern slopes of Mrzli vrh could offer the Italian forces an opportunity to clear the pass with few troops. He thus abandoned the idea of an attack, and decided to encircle the Italian forces by closing the Livek-Sovodenj Valley and the road to Matajur.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-37.

He moved from Livške Ravne along the forested western slope from Hill 1077 along the Livek-Sovodenj Valley in the direction of Polava. He left a messenger in Livške Ravne, who directed all his remaining troops in the direction of Polava.

The front of Rommel's units reached the valley two kilometres south-west of Livek at 12:30pm. When the first units emerged from the bushes 100m east of the road, which lead west, the Italian soldiers on the road were frightened and fled. Rommel's units waited at the spot where the road twice turned sharply, and cut through the Italian telephone lines; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Company and the 4<sup>th</sup> Company settled in the bushes on the slopes on both sides of the road. At that time communications with parts of Rommel's units were broken; it would be difficult for Rommel to advance to Monte Craguenza without two or three additional companies, or to count on the closure of the road to Matajur. Rommel sent Second Lieutenant Walz back for the remaining lost companies, and demanded that he inform Major Sprösser of his achievements and inquire about further plans. Meanwhile, Italian traffic resumed on the Livek-Sovodenj road. Rommel's soldiers captured the Italian units and directed traffic into a parking area on some sharp road bends, three kilometres behind the enemy front. There was no firing this time, and the prisoners, horses and mules were hidden in a ditch by a roadblock. They soon collected over 100 Italian prisoners and 50 vehicles. The soldiers refreshed themselves with the captured food and drink, and their morale rose. Rommel's units fired on an Italian military vehicle with a crew from the senior staff who wanted to inspect the problem with the telephone connection and see what the situation on the front was like. An observer on the east side of the valley reported that an Italian column was approaching from the direction of Livek. To prevent bloodshed, Rommel sent his deputy Stahl to the Italian company as an intermediary, demanding that they surrender unarmed. Waving white handkerchiefs and calling for surrender failed, however; the Italian officers captured the intermediary, and began firing on Rommel's units. After five minutes of fighting, Rommel again called on the Italians to surrender, but it was in vain. Violent German firing finally persuaded the Italians to surrender. Fifty officers and 2000 soldiers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Brigade surrendered. Rommel's deputy Stahl, together with

several soldiers, gathered the prisoners and took them to Livške Ravne. Rommel was assisted by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company in the final battles with the Bersaglieri. He drove towards Livek in a confiscated Italian vehicle to clarify the situation, and arrived there at 3:30pm. The remaining parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion under Major Sprösser, and the Leib Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had just reached Livek and the south side of the valley at that time. Rommel suggested to Major Sprösser that he and all his forces should climb the shortest route to Monte Craguenza, from Polava across Jevšček, and occupy it. This would prevent the Italian units from retreating to the south, and give Rommel the opportunity to attack the enemy from the rear, with parts of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division attacking from the north and north-east. This way, the troops could also control the only high-altitude road leading from Monte Craguenza to the Matajur massif, and cut off the Italian batteries which were moving along this road.<sup>263</sup>

After the surrender of Livek, the Italian units withdrew (in a more or less organized manner) along the Matajur road on the eastern slope of the Mrzli vrh-Strmol Ridge, and probably wanted to occupy the already prepared positions. Rommel foresaw that the Italian units on the Matajur road could stop the pursuers. In this way, the Italian forces would gain time to reorganize and occupy the already prepared positions. Rommel therefore proposed to occupy Monte Craguenza as soon as possible; Major Sprösser agreed, and assigned Rommel part of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion (the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Companies; the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Companies; and the Signals Company). Major Sprösser went to the brigade to report on the situation so far. He obtained consent to continue leading the attack, and provided artillery support for the planned fighting.

The Italian decision to stop the Germans from invading the positions on Kolovrat with the defence reserves in several battle lines on the eastern slopes of Kuk proved to be inappropriate. Rommel's units were thus given a break; it would have been better for the Italians to use their units to re-occupy Hill 1192, and obtain fire support on Kuk. If the Italian forces had succeeded in attacking Rommel's units from the east, Rommel would have been in a

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-41.

difficult position. Moreover, the Italians would not have had to set up three types of positions on the steep and rocky eastern slope of Kuk. They also made the mistake of not closing the high-altitude road on the southern slopes of Kuk, which would have allowed them to control the bare slopes below the road. Rommel managed to capture some of the Italian troops on Kuk; the remainder were captured by parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion and the Bavarian Leib Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. Rommel's units lost contact in Livške Ravne because the leader of the Machine Gun Company's pack animals let himself be captured. Thus, Rommel only had a third of his forces at his disposal in the Polava Valley, but he still closed the Livek-Sovodenj road. He had to give up the closure of the Matajur road near Monte Craguenza. The parts of Rommel's units which were separated in Livške Ravne later joined the attack on the Italian forces near Livek.<sup>264</sup>

The Italian units on Matajur and in the surrounding area were cut off from the rear, as the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division had already penetrated the Nadiža Valley. Simultaneous attacks by the Leib Regiment, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion on Livek, and three of Major Eichholz's battalions of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division on Golobi were successful; the soldiers marched into Golobi at 5:00pm, and into Livek at 6:00pm. They captured 1900 Italian prisoners and seized 18 cannons. The German Alpine Corps' command moved to Livek due to the rapid advance of subordinate units; General von Tutschek ordered to advance to the western slopes of Matajur, Sveti Lovrenc, and along the road from Livek to Sovodenj, and on to Monte Mladesena on the next day.<sup>265</sup>

Rommel's units continued towards the village of Jevšček and Monte Craguenza after the successful infiltration on the Livek-Polava road and the ambush on the Livek-Sovodenj road. Rommel and the parts of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion which were stationed near Livek set off to the roadblock north of Polava, and headed in the direction of Jevšček-Strmol to surprise the Italian units. Rommel was making his way towards Jevšček with exhausted units, and stopped in the shade of a hayloft. In front of the troops was a hollow

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-44. Further information on the operation of Rommel's detachment on the second day of the offensive can be found in: HStAS, M660/200 Bü2, Abteilung Rommel, Gefechtsbericht über die Durchbruchschlacht bei Tolmein, 28 October 1917, pp. 4-7.

<sup>265</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 222; M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 220.

overgrown with tall, dense bushes, and uncomfortably dark. There was a path leading through it, and confused voices, the giving of orders, and the noise of marching Italian units could be heard from the other side. Rommel's units retreated to the right of the path, and advanced along the steep overgrown slope. Rommel soon found that his reasoning was correct, for the voices of the Italian soldiers preparing to occupy the positions could be heard from the woods in front of him. At this point Rommel estimated that an attack on the fortified Italian positions over the brightly lit areas up the slope would be too strenuous and too risky even for fresh forces. He decided to rest, and thus gained time to thoroughly inspect the terrain and the enemy.

Rommel drew his units into a wide hollow, 250m from the enemy positions, which was safe from firing. He ordered a rest until midnight, and used the remainder of the units to protect the soldiers and to set up guards. He positioned the pack animals more to the west because they were so noisy. On his way to the place of rest he found that the Italian forces were still in the Polava Valley, as a fierce battle broke out between the 1<sup>st</sup> Bavarian Leib Infantry Regiment and some Italian troops which the Regiment had accidentally encountered. He sent his officers to inspect and determine what the possibilities of approaching the Italian positions were; what the strength and depth of the barbed wire entanglements was, and whether there were any gaps in it; and what the position of the village of Jevšček was. He was awakened by Second Lieutenant Aldinger at 10:30pm with the message that Jevšček lay 800m north-west of Rommel's units' rest area, and that the village was surrounded by barbed wire entanglements, and heavily fortified. The Italian units had not yet occupied the village. The reconnaissance unit also spotted Italian units moving up the slope in a south-westerly direction just above Jevšček.

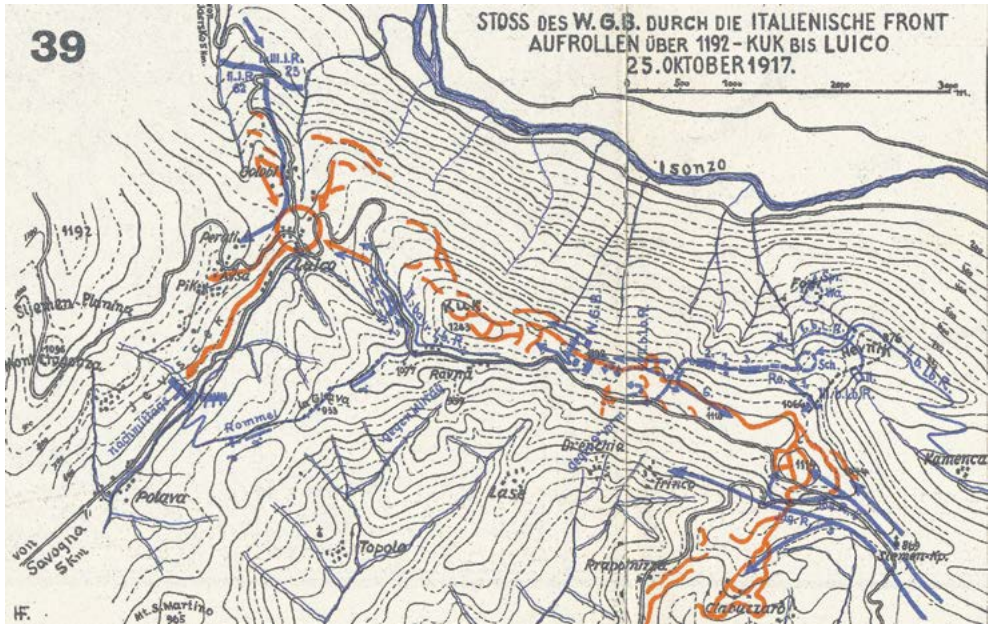
The information received by the reconnaissance unit convinced Rommel of the necessity to occupy Jevšček, as he was afraid of an Italian occupation. He called the guards and prepared the troops for march within minutes. The front of the advance party soon encountered barbed wire entanglements about 300m from Jevšček. All that could be heard were the footsteps of the descending Italian infantry about 100m above them. Second Lieutenant Aldinger was in the advance party, and was followed by the head of the troops

in a semicircular arrangement. Rommel sent patrols to search the land in the immediate vicinity and the village, and to find out where the Italians were and what their strength was. At the same time, most units with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Companies, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Machine Gun Companies, and the Signals Company marched to the village and its surroundings. Rommel left the pack animals unit outside the barbed wire entanglements. He then went with the patrol to see where the enemy was. The German patrols soon discovered that there was a column of Italian soldiers in the southern part of the village. They also saw that there were no Italian soldiers in the northern part, so Rommel decided to go with the units to Jevšček, and capture the Italian infantry in its southern part.

When the soldiers came to the village, they could hear dogs barking, and the Italians started firing from positions 100m to the right above them, but they only aimed at the woods to the left. Rommel's units did not respond. Soon the enemy stopped firing, most likely believing they had made a mistake. Rommel's units entered the village during the firing, and occupied its northern part in a semicircle. The enemy fired at them only from the north-western slope, while no shots were heard from the south side of the village. Rommel studied the map in one of the houses in Jevšček, and made a decision. Since Jevšček was fortified on the eastern edge, and the enemy was in positions north-west of the village and south-east of Jevšček towards Polava, these were probably carefully prepared Italian positions which were supposed to stop a penetration across the Livek Pass. The Italian movements which were detected by Rommel's units at night indicated that the Italians were doggedly trying to occupy these positions as soon as possible. Considering the method of fortification, Jevšček undoubtedly belonged to these positions, but the Italians had not yet arrived there.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup>E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 45-49.



Events on Kolovrat on 25 October 1917<sup>267</sup>

## The Berrer Corps

The units of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division continued their offensive operations on the left side of the German Alpine Corps; their 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment advanced along the northern and eastern slopes of Ježa; and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment left Ježa, and advanced westward along the Kolovrat Ridge. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment arrived near Hill 942 at around 9:00am, and seized ten howitzers on the eastern slopes of Ježa. The advance towards the Sleme chapel was hampered by a strong Italian attack from the direction of Klobučarji and Kum; but the Jäger Regiments met the Bavarian Jäger troops from the German Alpine Corps at around 9:30am. The 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment advanced along the Ridge of Kolovrat, and occupied a point on Monte la Cima above Klobučarji. After the fighting ended in the evening, the 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment captured many Italian prisoners and weapons: four mortars, twenty-four machine guns, and three hundred and fifty-two prisoners. The 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment lost two officers and thirty-six

<sup>267</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, annex.



soldiers. The 200<sup>th</sup> Division's 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment advanced in the direction of the villages of Dreka and Laze, and arrived in the village of Trinko at around 5:00pm. It continued on its way towards Praprotnica and Klobučarji.

By evening, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment had captured 1800 soldiers, 30 machine guns, and several cannons, mostly from the Arno Brigade, which was part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps' 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. The soldiers of the 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment followed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, and slowly climbed Ježa. That morning, Italian aircraft bombed the German troops on Kolovrat and in the vicinity of Kobarid. They were countered by German aircraft, which destroyed some of the Italian aircraft, while the remainder withdrew. The Italian air raid was thus over. At the end of the day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiments were ordered to prepare an attack on Kum for the next day; the Germans also expected engagements with the fresh Italian reserves coming from the interior of Italy.<sup>268</sup>

The 26<sup>th</sup> Division moved from Ponikve to Modrejce that day. The 119<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment arrived in Čiginj from Most na Soči, and the 121<sup>st</sup> Regiment moved to Modrejce. General Berrer's headquarters in Ponikve did not have good communications with the 200<sup>th</sup> Division, and it was not until the morning of 25 October that it learned of the occupation of Ježa. Due to the rapid advance of the Berrer Corps' units and better communications, General Berrer moved his headquarters to Modrejce. Units of the 200<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Divisions were ordered to advance to Azzida and Cividale the next day.<sup>269</sup>

## The Scotti Corps

Most of the units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division reached the line Ostri kras (*It. Monte Ostra Cras-Pušno-Avško*) in the evening of the first day of the offensive; the following day began a decisive attack on Globočak, which was defended by the 5<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Brigade and part of the Puglia Brigade. After heavy fighting, the attackers successfully occupied Globočak at around

<sup>268</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 56; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>269</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 223.

11:00am, and continued a successful penetration. The attackers also besieged the mountain of Čičer which was resolutely defended by the Treviso Brigade; the peak was not occupied until late afternoon, after heavy fighting. Units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division had crossed the Idrija River by evening; the greatest losses were suffered by the artillery, which had not anticipated such a rapid advance of units. The attackers captured more than 4000 soldiers and seized 60 cannons. The 7<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade did not advance much further that day, compared to the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division, while the 22<sup>nd</sup> Mountain Brigade spent the night on the Sveti Pavel hill above Ročinj. The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division lost 40 officers and 1550 soldiers (wounded or dead).<sup>270</sup>

The 5<sup>th</sup> Division was given the task of breaking through to Kum, which represented a fortified and well defended point on the way to Cividale. The attack was led by the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade with the 8<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment and the 52<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. The troops advanced in the direction of Čanče, Vogrinki, Strmi breg and Pušno. The division artillery was to support the attack, so it was sent to the road which ascends from Doblar towards Pušno. However, it could not reach the road that day, as the Italians had mined the road between Podselo and Doblar during their retreat. The 8<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment advanced slowly, as abandoned vehicles and cannons closed all roads and paths. According to the plan of attack of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division, the attack on Kum was to follow the artillery preparations. Knowing that there would be no preparations, the grenadier commander decided on a surprise raid, relying on the confusion of the Italians. The troops had to overcome obstacles in the valley of the Idrija River before they could attack Kum, which they only managed to do at around noon; the grenadiers then sneaked into the Italian positions in front of the village of Malinsko in small groups.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion began a frontal attack. Another battalion joined the encircling forces from the north, but the units did not reach the favourable starting positions until the evening due to the Italian artillery firing. The attack, which was only supported by some mountain cannons, was made difficult by the tough terrain, so the units stopped just below the Italian positions, and the

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

attack was postponed until the next morning. The 52<sup>nd</sup> Regiment advanced across Vogrinki and the top of the mountain of Glava to attack Kum from the south. Hill 678 near Tribil Superiore was occupied in the evening, and the rest of the division occupied smaller points of resistance in the rear area.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Division, which was in reserve, spent the night of 25 and 26 October in the Volče area; the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division moved to Grahovo ob Bači; the 4<sup>th</sup> Division arrived at the Šentviška planota Plateau; and the 29<sup>th</sup> Division arrived at Čepovan. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army attacked along the entire battlefield on the southern flank of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and by evening its units had reached the line Gornji Log-Kanalski vrh-Lohke-Sleme pri Batah-Madoni.<sup>271</sup>

## Italian defence on the second day of the offensive

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army with the 43<sup>rd</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and parts of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 34<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 64<sup>th</sup>, 56<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions resisted poorly. General Cadorna spent the entire day studying how to prevent the enemy from invading Friuli. He was aware that the attacked and demoralized units had to be separated from the enemy as soon as possible, and be allowed to replenish and consolidate, which meant retreating to one of the natural obstacles in the lowlands, such as the Torre (*Slo. Ter*) and Tagliamento (*Slo. Tilmont*) Rivers. Capello advocated a retreat to the Torre or Tagliamento River at night and in the morning of 25 October, to which Cadorna had generally consented, but there was a turn of events during the day. Capello handed over his command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army to General Montuori at 6:00pm that day due to illness. General Montuori was convinced that the enemy could be held back by immediately sending reinforcements and occupying three lines of defence, so Cadorna decided on a decisive defence in as-yet-unthreatened positions. Cadorna activated eight reserve divisions and three additional ones on 24 October to stop the enemy's penetration, but a large part of the units failed to reach the front in time due to the destroyed and blocked communications.<sup>272</sup>

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>272</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, pp. 360-361; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 62.

He ordered the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army's commander to withdraw heavy and medium calibre cannons across the Piava River in the vicinity of Treviso; other medium and heavy calibre cannons were to be withdrawn west of the Doberdò del Lago Valley; the Italians only retained heavy artillery east of the valley on the Komen Plateau. The Italians occupied the valley with two reserve divisions to secure the eventual withdrawal of the army from the Komen Plateau; they also prepared for a possible withdrawal of the army west of the Tagliamento River. They used the Palmanova-Codroipo road, and all the roads south of it.

It was evident that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was prepared to withdraw to the Doberdò del Lago Plateau; and that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was to resist on Kuk, near Vodice, and on the mountain of Sveta Gora. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's commander, General Montuori, ordered the occupation of the Punta di Montemaggiore-Zuffine-Monte Luppia-Matajur line of defence according to Cadorna's orders, which was held by the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps; decisive defence was to take place on the line Punta di Montemaggiore-Javor-Krnica-Ivanac-Monte Mladesena-Monte Purgessimo-Castelmonte-Korada. The Girgenti Brigade was assigned to defend Korada; the Jonio Brigade was assigned to defend Monte Mladesena; and the occupation and defence of Punta di Montemaggiore was entrusted to the Zona Carnia units and its 12<sup>th</sup> Corps.<sup>273</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's Command received a great deal of information the night before, indicating a possible disintegration of the front; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's commander thus issued an order to the 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Corps' commanders at 8:00am as the Army Commander. He wrote that the enemy had broken through the Italian lines of defence, and had invaded the rear area. He stated that the enemy was weak, and that commanders should look at the events in cold blood, and try to assess the real situation. The 8<sup>th</sup> Corps thus joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, and the remaining units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army were organized as follows:

- The 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Corps on the left wing under the command of General Etna;
- The 24<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Corps on the right wing under the command of General Ferrari;

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<sup>273</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 62; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 226-227.

- The rear area, and the defence of the Torre River under the command of General Sagramos.<sup>274</sup>

The right-wing units were not able to establish contact with the units on the right bank of the Soča River on the Avče-Čičer-Globočak line, as this line had been breached, and the enemy was already approaching Kanal from the north. The right wing thus had to be directed to the bridge in Plave. General Sagramos was ordered to gather and reorganize all the refugees of the retreating units, and to organize a resistance on the Tricesimo-Torre line. Cadorna remained pessimistic about a successful defence, as Stol had fallen, parts of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division in the Učje Valley were captured, and parts of the Potenza Brigade had retreated to Monte Lubia. The break-up of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps caused the withdrawal of its remaining parts towards Polava, and on to the line Sveti Martin-Planina-Kum. The remaining parts of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division and the 10<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group retreated unevenly towards Lig. It also became clear that no major reinforcements would come, so Cadorna demanded that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army leave the Kras, and temporarily secure the line Doberdò del Lago-Bridgehead near Redipuglia.<sup>275</sup>

The 8<sup>th</sup> Alpine Group joined the Zona Carnia. It had to defend Punta di Montemaggiore, and close the entrances to the Učje and Beli potok (*It. Rio Bianco*) Valleys. Of these units, two Alpine battalions and five machine gun companies under the command of Colonel Sapienza moved to Viškorša (*It. Monteperta*, south of the Gran Monte Ridge), from where they ascended the road to the Punta di Montemaggiore Plateau. Their resistance was supposed to decide the fate of the battle the next day, as this hill was the intersection of all the lines of defence. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was ordered to defend itself and close the enemy's passage on the line Punta di Montemaggiore-Javor-Ivanac-Monte Mladesena-Monte Purgessimo-Madonna del Monte-Korada-Paljevo-Kuk-Vodice-Sveta gora-Dol Pass-Solkan. The retreat to this line took place at night and on the next day. At that time, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army captured 700 Italian officers and 23,000 soldiers; it seized 200 cannons, 22 mortars, and many military vehicles and military items. Both Borojević's armies captured 223 officers

<sup>274</sup> L'Ufficio Storico: *L'Esercito Italiano*, pp. 361-362 L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 227.

<sup>275</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 227.

and 11,645 soldiers. A total of eight Italian aircraft were shot down, while the air force made 119 flights, and dropped 6500 kilograms of bombs. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army Command, in agreement with the command of the South-Western Front, decided to transfer the 50<sup>th</sup> Division to the Krauss Corps in order to strengthen the wing, which was to break through across Platischis to Tarcento. General von Below dealt with a number of logistical problems related to the concentration of units in the area of Kobarid, and with road congestion in the Soča and Idrijca Valleys.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup>L'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito: *L'Esercito Italiano*, p. 363; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, pp. 227-228.

## CONSOLIDATION OF POSITIONS ON MOUNTAIN RIDGES

### The Krauss Corps

The third day of the offensive was sunny and cold with better visibility than the day before. Italian communications between the units were cut off, aerial observations showed that the bases in the rear of the front had been evacuated, and that there was heavy congestion and heavy traffic on the road and rail lines in Friuli. This encouraged the attackers to escalate the pace of advance. The 1<sup>st</sup> Soča Army thus advanced further; its 17<sup>th</sup> Division occupied the Italian positions on the hill of Fajtji hrib; and the Italian counterattacks were successfully repulsed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army crushed the strong Italian resistance in the middle course of the Soča River, and occupied the line Vodice-Britof-Deskle.

The Italian army resisted violently on the left wing of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army. The 216<sup>th</sup> Brigade was involved in heavy fighting in the area of Černelske špice and Kanin, so that the attack on Sella Nevea was successful only later in the day, and the Italians withdrew from Prevala. The main German-Austro-Hungarian units advanced along the Učje Valley in a westerly direction. Krauss subordinated the German Jäger Division to the Edelweiss Division, and thus further supported most of the penetrating forces. The advance through the Učje Valley was hampered by road congestion and columns of prisoners. The units of the 217<sup>th</sup> Brigade attacked and occupied Skutnik (*It. Monte Guarda*), Kal and Nizki vrh in the early hours of the morning. The 14<sup>th</sup> Hessen Regiment's 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion had occupied Solbica (*It. Stolvizza*) in Resia during the descent from Skutnik (*It. Monte Guarda*) the night before. The Italians resisted violently on the Tanamea

Pass and on the peaks north of Nizki vrh. General von Wieden formed four parts from the two divisions: the 1<sup>st</sup> German Jäger Division advanced to the top of Resiutta; the second part consisted of two battalions of Austro-Hungarian mountain units and a mountain battery, which penetrated in the direction of fort of Kluže; the third part was also composed of the second part's units, but attacked in the direction of Venzone across the Tanamea Pass; and the fourth part consisted of the 216<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which was to descend the Rombon-Kanin Massif, and join the reserve in Žaga. Members of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division descended the southern slopes of Stol to Breginj, where they captured an entire Italian brigade. Most of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division entered Breginj at around 12 noon. The division advanced in the direction of the Monte Predolina-Monte Cavallo line, where the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiments occupied the significant hills in the vicinity. The Italians resisted on Javor for some time, until the 50<sup>th</sup> Division's advance parties arrived. The Italian prisoners reported that the entire 63<sup>rd</sup> Division had been sent from Tarcento to these positions.<sup>277</sup>

South of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division was the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, which was moved from the Stein Corps to the Krauss Corps; this caused minor problems that day, but did not escalate into a major crisis due to the distractedness of the Italians. Krauss gave his new division new tasks, although it was already carrying out the Stein Corps' tasks for the day. The Stein Corps was to attack the line Ivanac-Monte Craguenza-Monte Mladesena. The 1<sup>st</sup> Bosnian-Herzegovinian Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion from the 50<sup>th</sup> Division advanced along its right wing. The troops descended from the mountain of Mija and attacked the flank of the Italian forces which were resisting the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division's 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment in the Nadiža Valley. The Italian defence broke down and retreated. The other two battalions of the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade advanced slightly north towards Ivanac, while the remaining five battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade gathered between Ladra and Kobarid to reinforce the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade. The main obstacle to their faster concentration was the amount of traffic on the bridge over the Soča River near Idrsko. The advance parties of the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade conquered Prossenicco, Robidišče and Monte Luppia; most gathered around Log, Podbela and Kred. A company from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade

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<sup>277</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 64; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 231.



had arrived below the top of Ivanac by evening, and drove the Italian troops from there. The first analysis of the area showed that the Italian line of defence in this part was not yet complete, and that there were no major enemy forces nearby. This information did not reach the 50<sup>th</sup> Division until much later. Krauss ordered the 50<sup>th</sup> Division to advance to the peaks of Na gradu (987m) and Krnica that day, so no 50<sup>th</sup> Division units participated in the occupation of Ivanac. A dangerous gap was thus created in this important area, through which the enemy could have penetrated. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army Command decided to temporarily exclude several battalions and three mountain batteries from the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, which were to operate in the previously determined direction until Ivanac was occupied and handed over to the Stein Corps.<sup>278</sup>

The Tyrolean Imperial Riflemen occupied the summit of Stol early in the morning, and continued towards the Gran Monte Massif, the easternmost part of which is Punta di Montemaggiore. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Tyrolean Imperial Riflemen's 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment crossed the narrow Ridge which connects the Stol Massif to the Gran Monte Massif. The Imperial Riflemen arrived on the plateau of Punta di Montemaggiore at around noon, and noticed poorly entrenched Italian soldiers around the financial barracks on the western edge. Punta di Montemaggiore was important in all the Italian defence plans, so the attackers wanted to occupy it as soon as possible. Colonel Sapienza and his two Alpine battalions had arrived in Viškorša (*It. Monteaperta*) the day before, but seeing the penetrating enemy units, Colonel Sapienza decided that his units should be rescued from the ring. He left one battalion on the plateau, and descended back to the village of Viškorša with the remainder of the units. The abandoned Italian battalion clashed with the attackers, and the Italians withdrew in confusion before evening. Another Italian machine gun company was captured early in the morning of 27 October; it was heading to the summit, without knowing that it was already occupied. After the fall of Punta di Montemaggiore, the Italian units began to retreat across the Tagliamento River. The 55<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division did not take part in the fighting that day; it gathered around the village of Sedlo in Breginjski kot in the evening.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 232.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

## The Stein Corps

The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division and the German Alpine Corps were awake from 4:00am that day. The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division fought with the new Italian units in the Nadiža Valley; the Italian units were brought from Trentino on the night of 24 to 25 October. Their advance parties had already been repulsed the day before in a battle with the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment. It was originally thought that the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division would attack the enemy at Stupizza, and then continue along the slopes of Ivanac. The 50<sup>th</sup> Division was to assist it. However, as this division was given new tasks, the plan changed. The attack in the valley was to be carried out by the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment and the 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. Part of the majority of the troops, which were near Livek at that time, were supposed to descend to Podbonosec (*It. Pulfero*) and keep the enemy in the valley. The decisive blow was to be delivered from the flank by the Bosniaks from the 15<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade, who were to descend from Mija. Although this plan did not succeed completely, the Bosniaks decisively intervened in the conflict at Stupizza, and the Italians withdrew. The attacking troops reached Stupizza at around 2:00pm and began to ascend to Ivanac. Units of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division met with the 50<sup>th</sup> Division's battalions before evening.<sup>280</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division brought heavy artillery to the Nadiža Valley on that day, preparing to attack Cividale. There was great confusion during the withdrawal of the Italians. They left many weapons and vehicles and considerable military equipment behind. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment advanced to Podbonosec, and reached the village of Brišče (*It. Brischis*) before evening, where the division's command was already located. One battalion of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, with an engineer company, a battery and a cavalry squadron, received an order late in the evening to penetrate to Azzida in order to open the way for the penetration of the German Alpine Corps.<sup>281</sup>

The 117<sup>th</sup> Division arrived in Kamno at around 8:00am, and continued its way in the same direction as the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division. The German artillery began

<sup>280</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 64; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 233; M. Simić: *Po sledeh soške fronte*, p. 223.

<sup>281</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 233

firing on Cividale and the surrounding area at around 9:30am, but had to stop towards the evening because of the danger of firing at its own units which were rapidly advancing. The 13<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division from the reserve advanced to Volče, and was to arrive in Robič on 27 October, according to the plan of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army Command. It failed to do so due to the congestion on the roads.<sup>282</sup>

## **The German Alpine Corps and the raid on Matajur by Rommel's Detachment<sup>283</sup>**

Most of the German Alpine Corps were to enter the Nadiža Valley on that day between Lipa (*It. Tiglio*) and Klenje (*It. Clenia*), cross the river, and attack the southern part of the Ivanac-Monte Mladesena line of defence. The first units arrived in Lipa at around 3:00pm without resistance. The second column encountered physical obstacles at Polava, from which the Italian soldiers had until recently fired, and then withdrew. There was a conflict north-east of Sovodenj, in which the Italians used their artillery. The Corps' mountain batteries responded, and the Italians withdrew again. The units arrived in Clenia before evening, where the reconnaissance units learned that Azzida was heavily fortified and occupied, and already under attack by the advance parties of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division. Enemy forces were also present in San Pietro al Natisone (*Slo. Špeter Slovenov*). The corps artillery advanced slowly towards Livek, and all the remaining units of the German Alpine Corps spent the night in the vicinity of Sovodenj. The commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps, General Stein, ordered the German Alpine Corps to conquer Cividale by a sudden attack the next day. General Stein moved his headquarters from Kneža to Idrsko in the morning; traffic problems in the vicinity of Tolmin increased, and the artillery had difficulty advancing to the front line; moreover, there were many Italian prisoners moving in the opposite direction.<sup>284</sup>

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>283</sup> Further information on the operation of Rommel's detachment on the third day of the offensive can be found in: HStAS, M660/200 Bü2, Abteilung Rommel, Gefechtsbericht über die Durchbruchschlacht bei Tolmein, 28 October 1917, pp. 8-9.

<sup>284</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 233-234.

Rommel sent Second Lieutenant Leuze to inspect the southern part of Jevšček early in the morning of 26 October, to find out whether there were any Italians there, and to find a route half a kilometre west of Jevšček, around the Italian positions north-west of the village. Leuze returned at 4:30am, and brought an Italian prisoner with him. He reported that there were no Italians at the south-western exit of Jevšček, and that he had searched the route at an altitude of 500m north-west of Jevšček, and captured an Italian soldier there; otherwise there were no Italian units anywhere.

This message prompted Rommel to immediately occupy the altitude of 500m north-west of Jevšček with four detachment companies, leaving the remaining units in the village for protection, and to attack the Italians north-west of the village at dawn. This was not an easy decision. If the enemy from Monte Craguenza took control of the altitude which they were supposed to occupy in the dark, they would be forced to fight on two fronts. Rommel's units began to slowly leave Jevšček, and dawn was approaching. The units climbed Hill 830, and soon found that the Italian units were 100m to the left above them. Rommel predicted that his units would not be able to find adequate cover during the Italian attack, which could result in severe losses. He decided to withdraw the units from the danger zone. As the rear of the companies left the hollow, the Italians fired heavily on them from Monte Craguenza. Rommel's units escaped, but had difficulty defending themselves against the heavy enemy fire. There were many losses, among them the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company's commander, Ludwig. Meanwhile, a fierce battle had broken out in Jevšček. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Companies, led by Second Lieutenant Krauss, attacked the enemy north-west of Jevšček, as instructed, held them in position, and prevented them from hitting the rear of the remaining German companies.

Rommel and several messengers moved to an altitude of 500m north-west of Jevšček, and found cover in the bushes. Rommel analyzed the situation, and found that no more units were available. He ordered messengers to bring three groups of the 1<sup>st</sup> Machine Gun Company from the first line of battle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Companies to the covered area 50m east of Rommel's

position. He would form several attack groups, and take them up the slope behind the enemy's rear, north-west of Jevšček.<sup>285</sup>

The attack groups were ready to attack, but a call for surrender was sent to the Italians before the fighting began. That scared the Italians. They knew their battle was lost, so they began to surrender. A crew in the strength of three companies in positions between the German units and Jevšček, and the entire crew which was waiting in the ditches further north towards the Matajur road, surrendered to them. Due to the battle noise behind them, and the appearance of small attack groups on the north-western slopes at an altitude of 500m north-west of Jevšček, the crew completely lost their judgement. The fighting between the Italian crews on Monte Craguenza and the main body of Rommel's units, as well as the German presence behind them, led the enemy to believe that the Germans were attacking from the direction of Monte Craguenza, and that they had already occupied the dominant positions.

An Italian regiment with 37 officers and 1600 men surrendered to Rommel's units in a hollow 650m north of Jevšček. The regiment was well armed and equipped. Meanwhile, a battle was still going on 100m above them. The Italian crew on Monte Craguenza could not see all the action north-west and north of Jevšček. It was still pressing hard on the first German line of battle, but the German rear was already free. The disengaged companies near Jevšček were slowly approaching, and were already attacking Monte Craguenza from the front. The enemy resisted strongly.

Rommel advanced with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, and reached the lower bend of the Matajur road, on which stood 14 Italian field cannons and 25 wagons of ammunition. It was then that machine gun fire came down on them from the north, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company lost their commander, Second Lieutenant Aldinger, who was wounded by three shots. All the losses contributed to the battle rage of the soldiers, who were gradually taking up positions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, led by Junior Sergeant Hugel, attacked and occupied the top of Monte Craguenza at 7:15am. This sealed the fate of the enemy forces on the north-western slopes of Mrzli vrh.

<sup>285</sup> E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 48-49.

After the successful occupation of Monte Craguenza, Rommel's units accelerated towards Mrzli vrh and the Matajur road, which led along the west side. They came across fortified Italian positions on a wooded Ridge after a hundred metres of walking. Junior Sergeant Hugel, who was attacking the high Ridge, successfully fixed the Italian enemy (who was stronger both in numbers and weapons) from the front, and at the same time attacked his flank and rear with several groups. Thanks to this way of fighting, the enemy was only able to put up a defence for several minutes, then retreated down towards Livek.

Rommel then made rapid progress. Wherever he and his companies encountered Italian units, they attacked them quickly, and the connection with the rear was broken. Rommel was soon informed that machine gun battles were taking place north-east of Monte Craguenza with the Italians, who were holding back his units. The experienced German officer was not concerned by this, and decided to disregard the machine gun fire and keep attacking in the direction of Mrzli vrh until he encountered the stronger enemy.<sup>286</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company successfully occupied Hill 1192 two kilometres west of the village of Avsa on 26 October at 8:30am. Further advance was prevented by strong enemy forces, who were fortified 800m south-east of Mrzli vrh (1356m). The Italians fired on the Hill which had just been occupied by Rommel's units with several machine guns. Lively fighting could be heard right below on the slope and right behind in the direction of Jevšček, which indicated the successful advance of the remaining German Alpine Corps units. Rommel estimated that he needed at least two companies and a machine gun company to attack the Italian units on the south-eastern slope of Mrzli vrh, so he returned to the Matajur road, and Junior Sergeant Hugel had to hold Hill 1192.

While Rommel was looking for a signals officer to establish connection with his unit, he encountered a Bersaglieri unit 600m south of Hill 1192, which began to fire at him and follow him to Hill 1192. When Rommel reached Hill 1192, he ordered the stronger attack group to connect with the rest of the units, and gave them the order to move rapidly to Hill 1192. Meanwhile, parts

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<sup>286</sup> E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 50-51.

of the German Alpine Corps and the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, which were in the Perati-Avsa-Livek area, began to penetrate the Matajur road in the direction of Monte Craguenza. The 61<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which was marching at the front, encountered Italian units 1.5km south of Avsa, and attacked them. Parts of the German Alpine Corps behind them managed to penetrate along the Matajur road towards Monte Craguenza, and the Leib Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion got stuck in front of an Italian barrage position near Polava (part of the Jevšček-Polava-Sveti Martin positions).

When Rommel gathered all his units at 10:00am on Hill 1192, he felt strong enough to attack the Italian crews on Mrzli vrh. He managed to get artillery support by using light signals, which successfully bombed the Italian positions on the southern slopes of Mrzli vrh. A machine gun company from Hill 1192 struck the Italian crews with heavy fire and kept them fixed, while the troops, under Rommel's command, began to attack the wooded areas just below the Matajur road. They managed to encircle the west Italian wing, and then turned towards the flank and rear of the Italian positions. When the Italians saw Rommel's units, they quickly emptied their positions, and retreated to the eastern and northern slopes of Mrzli vrh. Rommel did not intend to follow the enemy, but ceased fire and went along the high-altitude road towards the southern slopes of Mrzli vrh, taking machine gun companies with him.<sup>287</sup>

During the battle he noticed that the Italians on the pass between the two highest peaks of Mrzli vrh were showing signs of disinterest and indecision, and were merely observing the German advance. Rommel's units began to wave handkerchiefs at a distance of 1000m from the enemy, but no one moved or responded. Rommel's units hid in the woods and occupied the edge of the woods at a distance of 600m from the enemy. Rommel approached the Italians together with Second Lieutenant Streicher, Dr. Lenz, and some of the soldiers, and at a distance of 300m from them saw that the Italians were shouting and waving their arms, and that they were all carrying weapons.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57

He decided to negotiate. He urged the Italians to surrender by waving a handkerchief. The mass of Italian soldiers just stared and did not move. Suddenly they began to move towards the German units, and the officers who opposed the move were dragged behind them. The Italian soldiers dropped their weapons and ran towards Rommel. They surrounded him, lifted him on their shoulders, and shouted “Evviva Germania!” This was a happy day for the Italians on Mrzli vrh, as it meant the end of the war for them.

Rommel’s units and some German-speaking Italian soldiers lined up the prisoners, and sent them along the Matajur road, towards the east. About 1500 men of the Salerno Brigade’s 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment were captured. Two soldiers followed the movement of prisoners across Monte Craguenza to Livek. A non-commissioned officer, Göppinger, was given the task of disarming and transporting 43 Italian officers. The Italian officers were seized with battle zeal when they saw Rommel’s weak units, but it was too late, as Göppinger performed his duties consistently.

Rommel and his units just below the Italian camp quickly continued on their way as the disarmed Italian regiment moved downhill. Several captured Italians told Rommel that the Salerno Brigade’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was on the slopes of Matajur.

The Regiment had a good reputation and had also been praised by Cadorna several times. Rommel predicted that the Regiment would certainly fire at the German units, which it did. Machine gun fire poured onto the troops on the western slopes of Mrzli vrh, but they avoided it successfully and hid in the thick bushes below the road. They continued sharply to the south-west over Hill 1223 to the sharp bend of the Matajur road south of Hill Krajec (1424m). Rommel ordered several machine guns to fire from the western slope of Mrzli vrh to deceive the enemy, while he moved imperceptibly through the dense bushes with the remaining units. He unexpectedly attacked an Italian crew at the top of Krajec, at a road bend 600m south of Hill 1423, which was still firing at the rear of his units and at the machine guns on Mrzli vrh.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup>E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, pp. 58-59.



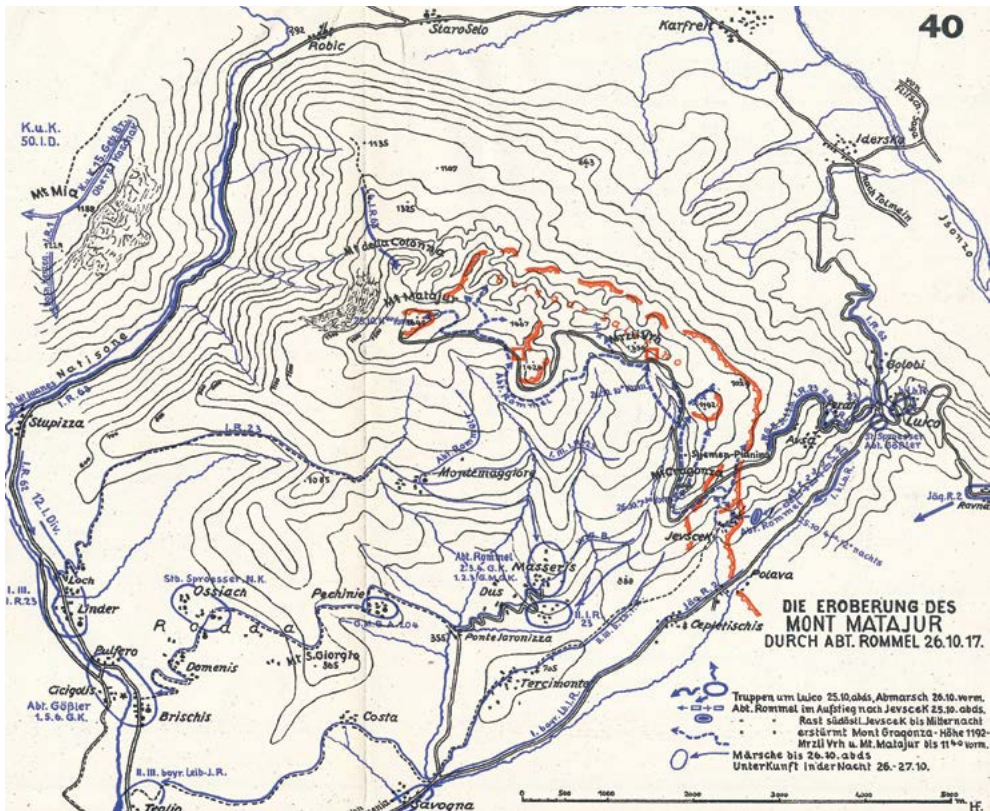
While Rommel's units were preparing for the attack, Rommel received orders that the Württemberg Mountain Battalion must return, as Major Sprösser had reached Monte Craguenza. The number of prisoners captured by Rommel (over 3200), gave the impression that the Italian resistance on the Matajur Massif was already broken. All parts of Rommel's units, except for 100 soldiers and six crews with heavy machine guns belonging to Rommel, began to retreat to Monte Craguenza. Rommel thought about ending the fight and returning to Monte Craguenza, but decided to advance towards Matajur, although this was not an option given in the battalion order.

Rommel's units attacked the Italian forces on Hill 1426 and Glava (1467m) from the south, and they responded poorly to the well-nested German machine guns. When individual Italian soldiers attempted to retreat to the northern slopes of Krajec, Rommel and a few soldiers moved across the Matajur road to its western slopes. Rommel and his units made rapid progress. The Italians were leaving their positions, and retreating to the eastern slopes of Krajec. The Italian battalion wanted to retreat from a height of 1467m to the south-west, but Rommel's units forced it to stop. They approached the Italians and began to wave handkerchiefs at a distance of 500m to the south. The Italians then stopped firing completely, and the Salerno Brigade's 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment began to lay down its weapons. The 1200 soldiers were separated from the 35 officers, and directed along the Matajur road towards Livek. The Italian commanding colonel was furious at the disobedience of the soldiers, and also because they were captured by only a handful of German soldiers. The German soldiers continued their attack without a break to the top of Matajur, which was 1500m away and 200m higher. They soon spotted an Italian crew which did not give the impression of surrendering. The chances of approach were not favourable, and Rommel decided to turn east on the slope and, hidden from the enemy, attack the Italian positions at the top of Glava (1467m). During the movement, small groups of Italian soldiers, with or without weapons, constantly tried to reach the place where the Salerno Brigade's 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment had laid down its weapons half an hour before.

Rommel surprised an Italian company on the sharp eastern Ridge of Matajur, 500m east of the summit. Unaware of what was happening behind its back,

the Italian company fought on the northern slopes below the Ridge which stretched from Glava to Matajur, facing north, against patrols of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, which were climbing towards Matajur from the direction of Kolena. When German units suddenly appeared behind it, the company quickly surrendered, without resistance.

Meanwhile, Second Lieutenant Leuze fired machine guns at the crew on the summit from the south-east, while the rest of his unit climbed the west side to the Ridge which stretches to the top. Other heavy machine guns occupied a rocky mound, 400m east of the summit, to protect the attack groups on the southern slopes. Before opening fire, the Italian crew at the top had already given signs of surrender. Thus, 120 Italian soldiers surrendered at the old border guard, and waited to be captured.



Attack of Rommel's detachment on Matajur<sup>290</sup>

<sup>290</sup>T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, annex.

On 26 October 1917, at 11:40am, one white and three green light rockets announced that Matajur was occupied. Rommel's detachment had managed to occupy Matajur less than 52 hours after the beginning of the offensive. They captured 150 Italian officers, 9000 soldiers, and 84 cannons. The response of the Salerno Brigade's 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment on Mrzli vrh, which was numerically stronger and better armed, was completely incomprehensible, but the low morale of the Italian soldiers had completely paralyzed the regiment. Rommel's detachment lost six soldiers in the three days of battle, and thirty were wounded. Most of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion then descended south through the village of Mašera (*It. Masseris*), and reached the Nadiža River in the evening.

## The Berrer Corps

The Berrer and Scotti Corps were moving south-west of Kolovrat that day, along the hills and valleys facing Cividale. The 200<sup>th</sup> Division notified the Berrer Corps' Command, shortly after midnight, that the 8<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment of the Scotti Corps' 5<sup>th</sup> Division was ready to attack Hum, and needed help from the north. Artillery preparations were scheduled to begin at 7:00am, and an infantry attack at 8:00am.

Three battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment, supported by two mountain batteries, began to move in the area of operation of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division in the early morning hours in the direction of Trinko, where an Italian warehouse was ready for them. They arrived there at 4:30am. They attacked Hlodič (*It. Clodig*), and then headed south to make room for the advance of the 26<sup>th</sup> Division. Most of the Division, including the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiments, headed along the military road from the Solarji Pass towards Ravne (*It. Raune*) at 3:30am. The 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment from Ravne continued its way towards Sveti Martin (*It. Monte San Martino*, 965m) at around 8:00am, and advanced over the bare Ridge which was heavily fortified with field and permanent fortifications, but almost unmanned. They conquered the summit by surprising the enemy, and captured 300 soldiers with all their weapons and a field hospital. The exhausted soldiers took a short break, but their motivation and physical fitness remained high.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment's battalion arrived on Hill 625 at around 3:00pm, and stopped at Vajnica (*It. Monte Vainizza*) in the evening. Although the soldiers were not yet ready to attack, they opened machine gun fire on the Italians. Reconnaissance patrols reported that the place was well fortified. The 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment arrived in the village of Hlaste (*It. Clasta*) near Gornja Mersa (*It. Merso di Sopra*) before evening, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment descended to Hlasta via Hlodič (*It. Clodig*). The units were joined by the battalions which had been sent to help in the occupation of Hum in the afternoon.<sup>291</sup>

The 26<sup>th</sup> Division came from the rear area to the front line that day. Two battalions of the 125<sup>th</sup> Regiment advanced towards Praprotnica to help in the occupation of Hum, which fell at around 9:00am, and then all the forces were directed towards Gornja Mersa. The division ascended Kolovrat along a difficult route across Jesenjok, Ježa and Sleme. Only the infantry and mountain artillery were able to move along this route. The morale of the units was high; also because rich stocks of food, drink and clothing were found in the abandoned warehouses.<sup>292</sup>

## The Scotti Corps

The Scotti Corps units had to occupy Hum in one day; Hum was one of the last important peaks to be occupied before the invasion of Friuli. It was defended by the Italian brigades Elba and Puglie. The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division was exhausted, so it was uncertain whether the units would succeed. The units first rested in positions around Globočak, then successfully made their way to Kambreško, and reached Sveti Jakob (745m) by evening, which is not far from Korada.<sup>293</sup>

The 8<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment was preparing to attack Hum in the area of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division, while the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion attacked the exposed enemy positions on

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<sup>291</sup> L. Galič, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 234; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 64.

<sup>292</sup> L. Galič, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 235.

<sup>293</sup> L. Galič, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 235; M. Simić: *Po sledih soške fronte*, p. 223.

Glava after 5:00am, disregarding their orders. They then advanced towards the well-defended village of Zaločila. After the occupation of the village, they began to ascend the northern slopes of Hum, together with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's riflemen, where they suffered heavy losses due to their artillery. One company, with the help of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division's 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, occupied the village of Obronke, and then the attack continued with the occupation of the village of Malinsko. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion's 8<sup>th</sup> Company began to climb the north-east Ridge shortly afterwards. The company commander left the machine gunners to fire at the columns of Italian soldiers who were retreating down the road from Zaločilo, and made his way to the top with several men, where he captured the crew. At 8:00am firing began on the summit, as was planned, so both the victors and the losers sought shelter in the trenches. The entire headquarters of the Italian brigade was captured in one of them.

Other attack units arrived and cleared individual sites of resistance when the firing subsided at around 9:00am. Eighty Italian officers, together with the commanders of both brigades, and 3500 Italian soldiers were captured. Fifty-one machine guns and 61 cannons were seized.<sup>294</sup>

The 5<sup>th</sup> Division's units then moved in the direction of the heavily fortified points of the hill of Sveti Ivan (*It. San Giovanni*, 703m) and the village of Dolenji Trbilj (*It. Tribil Inferiore*). The Italian crews escaped just before the arrival of German units; later, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Brandenburg Regiment and the 12<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment also arrived at the positions. The commander gave his units the objective of occupying the south-eastern area of Cividale the next day. The 57<sup>th</sup> Division arrived in Kostanjevica across Sela pri Volčah during the day, accompanied by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army's 28<sup>th</sup> Division. The units proved themselves during the occupation of Korada the next day.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division was ordered to continue the pursuit of the enemy along the Idrija River.<sup>295</sup>

<sup>294</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 235; M. Simić: *Po sledih soške fronte*, p. 223.

<sup>295</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 64; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 235.

## Coordination of the offensive plans

There were contradictions between the 14<sup>th</sup> Army Command and the Austro-Hungarian Supreme Command in Baden, which emerged shortly after the beginning of the offensive, as views on the demarcation of the sections of operation of all four armies (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Armies) differed. While Austria-Hungary wanted to assign a wider sector to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army before the offensive than it turned out on 24 October, it wanted to provide its Austro-Hungarian units, especially Boroevič's armies, with as large a share as possible of the pursuit and spoils now that the penetration had been successful, as well as squeezing the 14<sup>th</sup> Army into the area north of Udine, and taking the Austro-Hungarian Krauss Corps from it in favour of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army commander, General von Below, resisted; his reasons, like Austria-Hungary's, were material. The routes of advance of some units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army and the 14<sup>th</sup> Army crossed after arriving in Friuli. This led to unnecessary delays in the advance to the Tagliamento River. General von Below advocated the earliest possible withdrawal of Field Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf's army group from the Tyrolean fortress, and was prepared to give up part of the artillery in favour of this attack. He suggested that Austria-Hungary use several large units from Boroevič's group for the attack, which were unnecessary for penetrating into the plain, but would be useful to von Hötzendorf. A compromise was finally reached which maintained the current state of advance of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army and the temporary subordination to the 10<sup>th</sup> Army of those Krauss units which were working within its operational zone.<sup>296</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army units were to advance north at the bridge in Cornin, according to the command plans, and the southernmost point of penetration was the bridges at Delizia. The command wanted to occupy all the fortifications in the middle reaches of the Tagliamento River; the greatest problem faced was the difficult logistic supply, which failed to supply the units by the deadline due to the traffic congestion in the Soča Valley. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army units captured 40,000 prisoners and seized 380 cannons on the third day of the penetration; both Soča Armies now had 20,000 Italian prisoners and 250 cannons. Austro-

<sup>296</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 236-237.

Hungarian and German aircraft shot down 15 Italian aircraft that day, losing only four aircraft themselves. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army's reserve units made the following movements: the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division arrived in Tolmin in the evening; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army managed to bring its army reserves (9<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Divisions) into the vicinity of Avče by the evening; and the reserves of the south-western front arrived in the immediate vicinity of the Bridgehead: the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division arrived at Grahovo ob Bači, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division at Šentviška gora, and the 29<sup>th</sup> Division at Kal nad Kanalom.<sup>297</sup>

### **Cadorna's decision to withdraw**

Until the morning of 26 October 1917 Cadorna still hoped to halt the penetration, which would depend on a successful defence on the Punta di Montemaggiore-Korada line. He waited all day for the right moment to issue orders to his subordinate units to withdraw to strategic points of defence. He ordered the commanders of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies to resolutely defend the line Punta di Montemaggiore-Kuk-Vodice-Sveta gora-Dol Pass-Solkan, until the fall of the last man. He made the 20<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Divisions available to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which were to be used as an army reserve. He ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Command to immediately deploy units on the Torre and Versa Rivers. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was given the task of withdrawing to the Gorizia-Gorizia Bridgehead-Doberdò Valley line. Cadorna demanded that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army remove one division from the 8<sup>th</sup> Corps, and four brigades from the army reserve during the retreat or immediately thereafter at the latest. Two of the brigades were to remain in the army sector, prepared for fast transport to the objective if necessary. Cadorna demanded endurance, high motivation, and determination from his subordinates. He wanted to ruthlessly eradicate any sign of weakness. He sent a precautionary order to the commander of Zona Carnia to move the heavy modern cannons to the Spilimbergo training range, and to prepare for the withdrawal of units. He also handed over command of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division to him. The commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army received a similar

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<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

order and instructions from Cadorna to move the heavy modern cannons to the Piava River on the Pederobba-Asolo-Montebelluna line.<sup>298</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was given the 20<sup>th</sup> Division and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Division, while the remaining parts of the 50<sup>th</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> Divisions had to be moved to the opposite bank of the Tagliamento River to be manned, resupplied, reorganized, and transferred to the Supreme Command Reserve. General Montuori informed Cadorna that he had transferred the 16<sup>th</sup> Division by Torzano, the 10<sup>th</sup> Division by Corno di Rosazzo, and the Sassari Assault Brigade of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division by Manzano to his army command. A special corps was formed in the vicinity of Pinzano in the afternoon, as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which was to guard the bridges in the middle course of the Tagliamento River. In the evening, Cadorna issued an order based on reports that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies should be withdrawn to the right bank of the Tagliamento River, and asked the Supreme Allied Command for help. The British and French armies responded quickly, and began sending troops to help the Italian army as early as 28<sup>th</sup> October. Six French divisions of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army arrived in the areas of Verona and Mantova by 2<sup>nd</sup> December, and five British divisions by 15<sup>th</sup> December. Cadorna issued an order to withdraw the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army to the Tagliamento River on 27 October at 2:50am. The same order was sent to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army an hour later. Cadorna and his command left Udine that day and withdrew to Treviso, leaving no command or unit in the field to gather information and liaise with the retreating units. The third day of the offensive brought about a complete collapse of the Italian army, which was retreating to the Tagliamento River. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which Cadorna saw as the main culprit for the Italian defeat, withdrew in a disorganized manner.<sup>299</sup>

Cadorna ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies to withdraw to the Piave and Monte Grappa Rivers on 4<sup>th</sup> November. On the same day, the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Eugen ordered the South-West Army Group to expand the area of operation of the entire 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, and for all units to actively carry out attacks on the Italian units, and drive them to the Piave River or at least to the

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<sup>298</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 64-65; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 237.

<sup>299</sup> M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra*, p. 381; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 316; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 65.



Brenta River. Borojević's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Armies were to cross the Piave River in the area between Nervesa and the sea, and reach the Brenta River; at the same time, the Armies were given the task of sending units to occupy Venice (*It. Venezia*). The 14<sup>th</sup> Army was to advance to the Piave River north of Nervesa in the Belluno-Feltre-Fonzaso-Bassano area, and break communications with the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army. The Austro-Hungarian 10<sup>th</sup> Army was to advance down the Piave River to Belluno, and in the direction of Feltre to the Brenta Valley, where it was to attack the Asiago Plateau.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>300</sup>J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 146.

## CONTINUING THE PENETRATION

### The Krauss Corps

After the fall of Punta di Montemaggiore, Italian units began to retreat to the Tagliamento River. All the organized forces in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's area of operation now had to be used to slow down (no longer halt) the Austro-German penetration. It was of the utmost importance to save the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army's main body, whose right flank was constantly under threat during the retreat to the Tagliamento River. Cadorna thus sent orders to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies, and to the 12<sup>th</sup> Corps, to begin the withdrawal as a matter of urgency, which, however, was very difficult. There were only six or seven large bridges on the Tagliamento River, only two of which had strategic importance and adequate load-bearing capacity; these were the bridges in Delizia and Latisana. Many pontoon bridges were also erected over the Tagliamento River, over which the Italian army was able to retreat. The river rose sharply between 28 October and 3 November, destroying everything in its path, so traffic was only possible over the permanent bridges. The withdrawal of the large Italian army was a logistically demanding project, exacerbated by about 350,000 war refugees and 400,000 civilians who withdrew together with the soldiers.<sup>301</sup>

Even the most ardent Italian defenders on the Sella Nevea and Prevala Passes, where the Italian Alpini held the attackers for the entire day on 27 October, had to give in due to the collapse of the Italian army and the general withdrawal. The 10<sup>th</sup> Army's 59<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade attacked the positions in front of the Sella Nevea Pass again around noon; it suffered smaller losses and achieved greater success than on 24 October. The Edelweiss Division's 216<sup>th</sup> Brigade

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<sup>301</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 239.

tried to conquer the Prevala Pass in vain from the early morning hours, as the attack was unsuccessful due to a snowstorm and a lack of artillery support. It was only the occupation of the Sella Nevea Pass that forced the Italian Alpini in the vicinity of the Prevala Pass to withdraw from the Ridge. The events in the mountain world, however, did not affect the majority of the Edelweiss Division, which penetrated in a westerly direction with its three columns, as was planned. The middle column advanced to Resia and towards Resiutta, where during the day its mountain units crossed the Krnica (*It. Sella Carnizza*) Pass. The right column's advance party had already reached Stolbica (*It. Stolvizza*) the previous evening; it was completely exhausted and without its pack animals. On that day the Austro-German units also captured Ravnica (*It. Prata*) without any problems, but the Italians resisted fiercely on the hills left and right of the valley. Several infantry and Bersaglieri battalions and more than twelve cannons were immediately transferred there. The Italian resistance subsided by noon, and new groups of Italian prisoners set out for the rear area. Colonel von Mollinary's group attacked the hills north of Resia to make its way into the Raccolana (*Slo. Reklanica*) Valley and to reach the forts of Kluže as soon as possible. The southern column repelled a strong counterattack in the direction of the Tanamea Pass (*It. Passo di Tanamea*) in the morning, and then began to pursue the Italians. The troops conquered Forcella Musi and captured about 400 Italian soldiers and four machine guns. The Krauss Corps' advance party arrived at a distance of eight kilometres (as the crow flies) from the Tagliamento River near Venzone.<sup>302</sup>

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division was also successful on that day, as the resistance of the Italian defenders on Monte Cavallo and Zuffine was successfully suppressed, and the soldiers penetrated quickly. The speed of the penetration and the effect of surprise were such that the Italians failed to organize a defence. Only the mountain of Javor was not occupied during the first attack, but just before nightfall 3000 Italian soldiers were captured there.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division advanced to the left of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division, and encountered strong resistance in the Krnica-Čenebola (*It. Canebole*) area. The Italians failed to organize a successful counterattack, as units of the 50<sup>th</sup>

<sup>302</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 239-240.

Division had already attacked them and driven them out of their positions. The battles, although victorious, slowed the advance of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division's assault battalions, but by the end of the day the Austro-Hungarian troops had conquered Krnica and the Robidišče-Logje road. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade penetrated the Platišče (*It. Platischis*)-Prosnid (*It. Prossenico*) area without artillery. The occupation of places such as Fojda (*It. Faedis*), Ahten (*It. Attimis*) and San Gervasio was ordered for the next day. The Corps Command and the 55<sup>th</sup> Division remained in the same locations that day, and the 55<sup>th</sup> Division was ordered to accompany the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division across Platišče (*It. Platischis*) for the next day.<sup>303</sup>

## The Stein Corps

The corps advanced in the area bounded by the Tricesimo-Colloreto di Monte Albano line in the north, and the ZiriaccoFeletto UmbertoPlaino line in the south.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division had thus far penetrated the deepest into the Italian rear area, so it was ordered to pursue the enemy and cause the disintegration of their front. At around 4:00am the division's headquarters informed the corps command that it would begin to make its way along the Nadiža River in cooperation and agreement with the German Alpine Corps. In his reply, General Stein pointed out that the occupation of Cividale was the task of the Berrer Corps, and that the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division should focus on the occupation of the mountain area between the Nadiža Valley and the plain, especially Mladesena. By the time his response reached the division's headquarters it was already too late, as the units had gone into action according to the previous plan. By around 2:00am, the 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion from the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division and half of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion had already conquered San Pietro al Natisone (*Slo. Špeter Slovenov*), and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment attacked Ivanac to continue its journey towards Fojda (*It. Faedis*) from there at around 5:30am. Most of the division moved along the Nadiža

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

River towards Ažla (*It. Azzida*), while the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment and the other half of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion attacked Monte Mladesena from the north over Tarčet (*It. Tarcetta*). The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division thus carried out both the old and the new tasks. The Italian attack from the direction of Azzida was repulsed in the morning, but it slowed the advance somewhat, so that by evening the combined units of the German Alpine Corps, the 200<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Divisions, had reached the outskirts of Cividale. The attack from the north on Monte Mladesena began at around 7:00am, and the top was conquered as early as around 10:00am. It was conquered by two battalions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment and the Bavarian Leib Regiment. Around 1000 Italian prisoners and 4 cannons were captured. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment then advanced west of Monte Craguenza and stopped in the village of Šenčur (*It. Sanguarzo*), while the 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiment arrived across Ivanac to the village of Fojda (*It. Faedis*). The Italians, meanwhile, had already fled across the Torre River. In doing so, they destroyed all the bridges on the Breg (*It. Grivo*) Stream and on the river.<sup>304</sup>

## The German Alpine Corps

The German Alpine Corps headed towards Cividale even before the official order by the Corps Commander, General Stein. Despite the Italians' numerical superiority, the well-fortified and experienced German unit managed to occupy Monte Mladesena, which fell at 10:00am. The 10<sup>th</sup> Jäger Battalion, which advanced from the north side towards the summit, seized another 15 cannons and captured 150 Italian soldiers. This was the fall of the last obstacle before the plain. Major Bothmer's Leib Regiment was the first to enter Cividale at 3:00pm; only Monte Purgessimo (*Slo. Krkoš*) was still defended in this area. The German Alpine Corps returned to its area of operation in the afternoon; the Württemberg Mountain Battalion broke through to Ronchi dei Legionari (*Slo. Ronke*), and occupied an undamaged bridge over the Breg Stream. Long-range artillery fired on Cividale from morning to early afternoon that day. The following day, the corps command ordered a penetration in the direction of Udine (*Slo. Videm*)-Maiano. The 117<sup>th</sup> Division came from Robič to Stupizza,

<sup>304</sup>Ibid., pp. 240-241.

and had to be in Cividale the next day. The 13<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division remained between Robič and Kobarid.<sup>305</sup>

## The Berrer Corps

The 26<sup>th</sup> and 200<sup>th</sup> Divisions advanced towards the Monte Jof (*Slo. Viš*)-Monte Purgessimo-Rualis line, and occupied Cividale in the morning. The 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division advanced towards Azzida, where the Italians prevented the advance into Cividale with effective artillery firing from Monte Purgessimo. Together with Castelmonte, Monte Purgessimo was one of the most important Italian fortified bases, and was difficult to occupy without artillery support, so the 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment waited for the 26<sup>th</sup> Division to begin their attack and attract the enemy's attention. Two battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment attacked at around 11:00am, and the fire from Monte Purgessimo began to weaken rapidly at around 1:00pm. The 200<sup>th</sup> Division was already able to move along the left bank of the Natisone River, and advanced towards Cividale. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiments advanced towards Udine immediately after the fall of Monte Purgessimo, and bypassed the abandoned Cividale. They reached Moimacco (*Slo. Mojmak*) at night, and the Torre River on 28 October. The 26<sup>th</sup> Division occupied Monte Purgessimo with the help of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division's 3<sup>rd</sup> Jäger Regiment. Most of the division only arrived in Cividale in the evening, as the bridges in Cividale and Azzida had been demolished. The advance towards Udine continued. Three groups were formed: at the front was the 121<sup>st</sup> Regiment with one mountain battery and several pioneers; it was followed by the 119<sup>th</sup> Regiment with one battery; and at the rear was the 125<sup>th</sup> Regiment.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

## The Scotti Corps

The 5<sup>th</sup> Division had to advance westward towards the mountain of Korada according to their orders, regardless of the success of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army. The 8<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Regiment was at the head of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division; its advance party included a battalion of Captain von Witzleben's riflemen. This battalion soon encountered a well-fortified Italian defence on Monte Spig (*Slo. Špik*). Nevertheless, the regiment managed to capture 1000 Italian soldiers and repel all Italian counterattacks. Captain von Witzleben attacked from one side with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Companies; and the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion attacked from the other side. The encirclement was completed at around 2:00pm, and the summit fell at around 4:00pm, despite the Italian attempts to counterattack. The Italians then fled towards Castelmonte (*Slo. Stara Gora*). A total of 2000 Italian soldiers and 20 machine guns were captured. Monte Spig was a hard to conquer and well-fortified Italian fortress, as was Castelmonte, so it was necessary to continue with the attack. Castelmonte was occupied at around 6:30pm with the help of the 26<sup>th</sup> Division's battery; around 600 Italian soldiers and 16 machine guns were captured. The 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment stopped at Monte Subit (*Slo. Subid*) in the evening, a hill above Cividale, and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment stopped at Iainich (*Slo. Jagnjed*). The 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment, which had been in the division's reserve until then, moved from Ročinj to the hill of San Giovanni (*Slo. Sveti Ivan*).<sup>307</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division advanced along the roads in the Idrija Valley that day, but its movement was hampered by destroyed bridges and the high water in the river. It reached Selce (*It. Cladrecis*) and Teje (*It. San Pietro Chiazzacco*) by evening. The corps's headquarters remained in Slap, and then moved to Kambreško the following day. Six divisions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army crossed the Soča River between Ročinj and Plave on that day. There was traffic congestion on the Tolmin pontoon bridge, which caused columns of vehicles all the way to Podbrdo. There was also traffic congestion in the Idrijca Valley due to the increased numbers of units and the train of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army. The long columns of Italian prisoners caused many problems to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Its units had difficulty supplying and supporting the artillery

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

units, which remained far in the rear area. Although most of the retreating Italian units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies had only reached the Cormons (*Slo. Krmin*)-Monfalcone (*Slo. Tržič*) line, they still had the same route from the Tagliamento River to Codroipo as the Austro-German units. These could prevent the Italian units from retreating, and destroy both Italian armies. German aid to the Austro-Hungarian units was originally offered only as far as the Tagliamento River, but it was clear that the final destination had to be moved further west at the chance of such a victory. It was most important for the Austro-German units to reach the bridges before the Italians destroyed them. General von Below decided that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's left wing would advance towards the bridges at Codroipo, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army, who had the bridges in their operational area, was not able to reach them in time. Most had to advance through Udine to the west, and try to reach the Tagliamento River as soon as possible. Archduke Eugen, commander of the South-West Front, confirmed this plan and issued an order at 7:00pm, in which he wrote that a rapid occupation of the Tagliamento Passes west of Codroipo would create an opportunity to close the enemy's retreat to the west. He also wrote that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's left wing would advance from Udine to Codroipo, and that urgent orders would be issued in time for the advance of Borojevič's army group through the Udine-Cervignano (*Slo. Červinjan*) line.<sup>308</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command received news on the evening of 26 October that the French had penetrated the Western Front and caused considerable losses to the German units. The German Supreme Command therefore demanded the return of part of the borrowed 14<sup>th</sup> Army's artillery. Before the evening came the news from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army that the attackers had not yet conquered Korada, which still belonged to the Italians. This was mainly due to problems with the transport of artillery on the roads from the Soča Valley to the west. The army and front reserves did not move that day. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army proposed that the South-West Front command transfer all unnecessary units and the artillery of both Soča Armies to Tyrol, and thus enable the Austro-Hungarian offensive as soon as possible. However, the South-West Front's Supreme Command ignored the calls of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., pp. 243-244.



## THE PLANNED LINE OF THE OFFENSIVE REACHED – TAGLIAMENTO

### Advance of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's units

As early as 25 October, Cadorna ordered Sagramos to keep the enemy on the Torre River with six divisions to give the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army enough time to retreat behind the line of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which Sagramos failed to do due to the disarray in the army. On 27 October at 7:00pm, after the talks with von Below, Archduke Eugen ordered the 14<sup>th</sup> Army to advance from Udine to Codroipo to occupy the bridges on the Tagliamento River as soon as possible. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army therefore rushed to occupy the bridges at Pinzano, Dignano, and Codroipo. The ever-faster advance caused many logistic problems, as the supply units failed to supply the rapidly advancing units on time. In addition, the units had to leave the heavy artillery and many Italian prisoners of war at the peak of the advance, which required a certain number of crews to control them. The operation was difficult due to the roads which were closed or difficult to pass because of mud, many Italian prisoners, and equipment.<sup>310</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command was situated in Kneža on 28 October, and in Kobarid on 29 October. Due to poor radio communications between the army command and the corps, the Stein Corps received the order too late to demarcate the areas of operation between the units; it thus advanced in the direction of Maiano-Udine, while the Berrer Corps advanced in a straight line towards Udine, further south than the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command had predicted.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>310</sup>J. in E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 119-120.

<sup>311</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 245.

The Krauss Corps were to advance in the direction of Colloredo di Monte Albano-San Daniele-Vacile that day. Fighting took place around Prevala on the morning of 28 October; and the remaining Italian Alpini surrendered at around noon. The northern column of the Edelweiss Division reached the last medium mountains above the Fella (*Slo. Bela*) River Valley that day, and came to Monte Staulizze (*Slo. Stavlica*), thus threatening the withdrawal of units from the Carnic area. The southern column, including the 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division, had to occupy San Gervasio and Attimis, while the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division tried to occupy the strong fortress of La Bernadia. The units advanced without artillery support, but had no major problems in conquering the fort on Krnica, as it was not completely occupied. The units advanced towards Tarcento and reached the Torre River in the evening, where the bridge had been demolished. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigade remained on the left bank, while the 98<sup>th</sup> Brigade managed to cross the river and advance towards Tarcento.<sup>312</sup>

The Stein Corps was given the task of advancing in the direction of Plaino-Silvella-Gradisca d'Soča (*Slo. Gradišče ob Soči*). The advance of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division was hampered by bad weather and the fact that only the bridge in Pulfero remained standing along the entire middle reaches of the Natisone River. The 62<sup>nd</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiments had advanced to the Torre River near Savorgnano and Primulacco by the end of the day. The German Alpine Corps managed to occupy the bridge across the Torre River in the vicinity of Salto, which was important for further progress. The 117<sup>th</sup> Division made its way to the village of Ronchi, the 13<sup>th</sup> Division reached Robič, and the German Alpine Corps' artillery fired at the railway station in Udine.<sup>313</sup>

The Berrer Corps was given the task of advancing in the direction of Chiavris-San Marco-Coderno-Arzenutto. The Berrer Corps' units crossed the Torre River, occupied Udine, and continued their march on 28 October. The 26<sup>th</sup> Division penetrated to Udine in the early morning hours to take control of the area south and west of the city, while the 200<sup>th</sup> Division also penetrated to Udine to take control of the city and its northern outskirts. The advance

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<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

party only included some of the units of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division and its 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment, as the remainder were several hours behind. Units of the 7<sup>th</sup> Italian Corps defended themselves fiercely on the accesses to the Torre River at around 4:00am, but the attackers managed to break through the defence line and capture 600 Italian soldiers and 16 machine guns. They penetrated through Beivars and on towards the Udine-Gemona del Friuli railway line. One of the companies entered the northern part of the city, which was abandoned, looted, and full of military material, at around 10:00am. The members of the 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment were tired; in addition, the Italians in Udine resisted well. The regiment managed to suppress the resistance, especially after the arrival of reinforcements. They soon penetrated further north to Feletto Umberto, but then the units stopped in Colugna due to exhaustion. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiments continued their penetration north of the Udine-Cividale road; and the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment penetrated along the road and entered Udine from the west, fought a retreating Italian army unit near Remanzacco, and then continued its journey towards Udine.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment caught up with and overtook General Berrer's vehicle at around noon; General Berrer was driving to Udine in belief that the 26<sup>th</sup> Division had already taken its assigned place. The vehicle ran into an ambush on the outskirts of San Gottardo, in which two Italian carabinieri killed General Berrer and his aide-de-camp. The death of General Berrer was a great tragedy, as he was a popular commander who always wanted to be in the front lines alongside his soldiers. The corps command was taken over by General Hofacker, then the commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> Division. A total of 1700 Italian soldiers were captured by the Berrer Corps' units that day at the railway station in the southern part of the city. By evening, all the units of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division and parts of the 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Regiment, which had come there from the west, had gathered in the city.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Division reached Selvis that day, south of the Udine-Cividale road, but was unable to cross the Torre River due to the high water level and the strong defence on the other bank. The units stopped, waited for the Austro-Hungarian artillery, and then continued to move across the bridge near the town of San Gottardo at 3:00pm. They eventually crossed the river over a

bridge on the main road, and arrived in Udine in the evening. The morning's events in Selvis nevertheless hastened the flight of Italian soldiers from Udine. The 125<sup>th</sup> Regiment bypassed Udine on the south side, and captured a long column of lorries in Pradamano. By evening, just one battalion had captured 3000 Italian soldiers and a large amount of equipment.<sup>314</sup>

The Scotti Corps advanced in the direction of the Udine-Codroipo railway line and Casarsa.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Division penetrated towards Remanzacco that day on the east side of Udine, and continued its way towards Codroipo. It thus prevented and cut off the retreat of the Italian units, which were withdrawing from the hilly areas. The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division, which had suffered heavy losses in the first two days, was given the task of occupying the bridges at Codroipo. The division began its march towards the bridges at 4:00pm, and halted in Udine in the evening, where it was ordered to take up the positions of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>315</sup>

On 28 October, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command tried to coordinate the operation of all corps, and establish the planned sections of their operation, while the focus of operations continued to be on the right wing. The Italian units withdrew in a more or less organized manner in the area of both Soča Armies, so that the mountain of Korada fell without a fight; towards the evening, units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army had already marched into Cormòns (*Slo. Krmin*). Gorizia was liberated on the same day. The 96<sup>th</sup> Karlovac Regiment was the first to enter the city. The traffic conditions in the vicinity of Tolmin improved slightly, but there was still traffic chaos in the south due to the large number of soldiers and military equipment belonging to both Soča Armies.

General von Below noted that the success had been so great and rapid that most of the cavalry units from the interior had failed to move to the front line and the rear area in time. All the Austro-German units penetrated to the lowlands on 28 October; Udine was occupied, and Gorizia was liberated.

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<sup>314</sup>J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 120-121; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče I*, p. 246.

<sup>315</sup>J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 120-121.

Although the Soča Valley was crowded with penetrating units, vehicles, livestock, and columns of Italian prisoners, the situation gradually calmed down. The Germans undoubtedly sent their best units to the Soča Valley, and the German element and influence prevailed in the composition of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division and the German Alpine Corps were the most successful, but the important roles of other German and Austro-Hungarian units should not be overlooked.<sup>316</sup>

## Battles for the Italian Bridgeheads

On 29 October, the Krauss Corps, the Edelweiss Corps, and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division penetrated into the Val Canale (*Slo. Kanalska dolina*), and occupied the forts of Bila, Raccolana (*Slo. Reklana*) and Tarcento and the surrounding area. The 55<sup>th</sup> Division was directed to the bridge at Cornino, and companies from the Stein Corps penetrated between Monte di Ragogna and Dignano to occupy the bridges at Pinzano and Dignano as quickly as possible. The 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division headed towards Pinzano, and the German Alpine Corps towards Dignano. Although no official order had yet been given, unit commanders waited for the order to continue the pursuit across the Tagliamento River, and gave their units appropriate orders. The Hofacker (formerly Berrer) Corps also directed its units to the bridges between Ragogna and Codroipo. Parts of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division were the first to reach Dignano, but the Bridgeheads were well defended. The Italians managed to destroy the bridges, and crossing the river in this part was not possible due to the high water level and the lack of pontoon bridges. The units searched in confusion for a passage across the river, and tried to find an intact bridge or a useful passage. The Stein and Hofacker Corps drove straight into the retreating enemy crowd. All the remaining units of the shattered Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, especially its right wing, were captured, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army managed to retreat across Latisana. The Udine-Codroipo road was impassable due to vehicles, cannons, livestock, carriages, refugees, and soldiers. Military losses on the German-Austro-Hungarian side were small, but the units were exhausted, and disputes began to arise between the German

<sup>316</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 247.

and Austro-Hungarian units over the division of booty. The last significant resistance of the Italian units took place in Codroipo.<sup>317</sup>

The 10<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Army, which operated north of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Soča Armies in the south were ordered to exert pressure and attack the enemy. However, there was no major pressure on the enemy, with the exception of several attacks by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army near the Banjšice Plateau. About 300,000 soldiers of the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army withdrew to the reserve positions without any major problems, losses or engagements.<sup>318</sup>

On 30 October General Hofacker ordered the 26<sup>th</sup> and 200<sup>th</sup> Divisions to penetrate along the right bank of the Tagliamento River after the occupation of the bridges at Delizia, first in the direction of Casarsa and San Vito. There was still an optimistic belief that they would be able to occupy at least one undamaged bridge. Movement began at around 6:00am. The first units reached the newly destroyed road bridge at around 11:00am. The same happened with the railway pontoon bridge, which was destroyed by the Italian soldiers. The situation was no different in the case of the 200<sup>th</sup> Division at Dignano, where the Italian soldiers had also destroyed the bridge. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command received news at around 9:00am that units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army had broken through the Udine-Palmanova line. Further movements were determined on the basis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army taking care of the bridges in Latisana, and the units of the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army retreating across them.<sup>319</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian and the 5<sup>th</sup> and 117<sup>th</sup> German Divisions engaged in heavy fighting with the retreating Italian units and counterattack units south of Udine that day. The Krauss Corps units occupied Ponte, Stazione per la Carnia, Venzone (*Slo. Pušja vas*) and Gemona del Friuli. They also occupied the forts in Osoppo and Ospedaletto. Their movement was greatly hindered by artillery fire from Monte Festa, a fortress on Monte San Simeone, but they could not defend themselves in any other way than to either cross the Tagliamento River or fire the siege cannons. The Bosniaks from the 55<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>318</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 124-125; M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra*, p. 381.

<sup>319</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 248-249.

Austro-Hungarian Division fought with the strong Italian units in Maiano and Susans, captured 1000 Italian soldiers after the fierce battle, and continued on their way to the railway bridge in Cornino. The first attempt to occupy the bridge was unsuccessful, and a new attempt was postponed until the next day.

The Stein Corps' units advanced west that day, trying to reach the bridges in their area of operation. These were the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division at Pinzano and the German Alpine Corps at Dignano. The Italians resisted fiercely, and the penetration was slowed down. About 10,000 soldiers were captured around San Daniele, and only the Monte Ragogna base still resisted. Finding that the bridge in Dignano had been demolished, the German Alpine Corps headed north towards the intact bridge in Pinzano, along which heavy traffic was flowing. There was a misunderstanding with the higher command, and the Guards Regiment, which was near the bridge, had to return to the south. The unique opportunity to cross the bridge on 30 October thus failed. The bridge was passable until 1<sup>st</sup> November, but could not be crossed due to the strong Italian defence on the opposite bank. It was then destroyed by the Italian soldiers on the same day.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command was waiting to see who would ensure the crossing of the rising river, so that units could be sent across the Bridgehead to the south-west as soon as possible. There was no pontoon equipment available, so the general direction of the penetration after crossing the river was determined preemptively. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army had to penetrate west along the northern edge of the Venetian lowlands. The first objective of the Krauss Corps was to occupy Sacile, while the other corps were to occupy Pordenone. Cadorna formed a new corps under the command of General di Giorgio, with the 20<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Divisions north of Spilimbergo to defend the banks of the Tagliamento River and the river crossings.

The 33<sup>rd</sup> Division was important in stopping the Austro-Hungarian and German units on 2 and 3 November.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

## Crossing the Tagliamento River

There were disagreements between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Armies on 31 October; they were not penetrating south towards Latisana, but towards Codroipo, and became dangerously intertwined. The Italians completed the withdrawal of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army unhindered that day, and destroyed all the bridges. The Hofacker Corps was attempting to cross the ruined bridges at Delizia. The 200<sup>th</sup> Division was advancing further south, and was to arrive halfway to Latisana by evening. It met with units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army along the way. The bridge at Madrisio, which it reached late in the evening, was partially demolished, and all attempts to repair it failed due to heavy firing from the opposite bank. The situation in the evening was as follows: the Scotti and Hofacker Corps on the left wing had failed to cross the river, and all the bridges were destroyed. Continuing the penetration to the south was pointless, and the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command demanded that all forces return to the Codroipo-Udine line. There were no other operations on 1 and 2 November, other than a number of failed attempts to cross the river. Thus, the pursuit of the enemy stopped for the first time on 30 October. The 50<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and parts of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, gathered in the area of the Krauss Corps, around Monte Ragogna and the Cornino bridge. They were also unsuccessful in reaching Clapat Island. While waiting for the arrival of artillery, both divisions tried to occupy Monte Ragogna, but failed to do so on 30 October.<sup>321</sup>

Thanks to air reconnaissance, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command received information on the further withdrawal of the Italian army to the west. It was obvious that Cadorna did not count on a serious defence at the Tagliamento River, especially since only the rising waters had prevented the forcing of the river on a broad front until then. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army units were thus able to get a well-deserved two-day rest. All attempts to cross over to the other bank were unsuccessful until the Bosniaks from the 55<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division crossed the river over the destroyed bridge at Cornino on the evening of 2 November, and secured a Bridgehead the next morning, which allowed the entire Krauss Corps and the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division to cross the river that day. This crossing was one of

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., p. 250.



the most important river crossings in the breakthrough, as the Italians had destroyed the arch of the western end of the bridge.<sup>322</sup>

Other attack units also had difficulty crossing the bridges; the advance parties of the 60<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Army, together with the Germans of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division, arrived at the bridge in Madrisio on 31 October. The bridge was built of stone piers and a wooden structure which was burned by the Italians. The Germans went north and left the Bridgehead to the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, who extinguished the fire.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Division had to move north due to the confusion of commands on 1 November, and the bridge was handed over to the German 157<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 117<sup>th</sup> Division. The regiment handed it over to the 44<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Rifle Division. The Italians decided to thoroughly destroy the bridge while relocating units on the opposite bank.

The 60<sup>th</sup> Division thus lost the opportunity to be the first to reach the opposite bank of the Tagliamento River. Somewhat further south than Cornino, in the operational zones of the Krauss and Stein Corps, was another large wooden bridge at Pontaiba (or Valeriano). When units of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions broke the resistance on Monte Ragogna, and captured about 3000 Italian defenders from the 20<sup>th</sup> Division of the Di Giorgio Corps, the resistance of the bridge defenders diminished, and the soldiers were able to begin repairing the bridge. The first battalions of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division crossed the river on the west side of the bridge on the evening of 2 November. The bridge was somewhat repaired, and part of this division went south to help the German Alpine Corps repair the bridge at Dignano. Two Bridgeheads were repaired on 3 November, and a crossing regime was established. The 55<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division crossed the river at Cornino, followed by the German Jäger Division; the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division was the first to cross the river at Pontaiba, followed by the 50<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division and the remaining part of the Stein Corps.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., pp. 250-252.

General von Below prepared a reorganization of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army on 1 and 2 November. Given that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Soča Armies were on the same front line, and that the front narrowed, the Scotti Corps (1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Divisions) and the 200<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Divisions were transferred to the army reserve, and the composition of the remaining three corps was as follows: the Krauss Corps consisted of the 50<sup>th</sup>, 55<sup>th</sup> and the German Jäger Divisions (the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division was temporarily in the 10<sup>th</sup> Army, but later returned to the Krauss Corps); and the Stein Corps consisted of the German Alpine Corps and the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Rifle Divisions. The Hofacker Corps consisted of the 26<sup>th</sup> and 117<sup>th</sup> Divisions. The Stein Corps had captured 80,000 soldiers, 700 cannons, and much military material by 1 November; the Hofacker Corps had captured 99,000 soldiers, 690 cannons, 100 heavy mortars, and 700 lorries. Around 400,000 civilians were said to have fled along with the Italian army. The German units were only available for the breakthrough to the Tagliamento River, as no one had expected such success. The South-West Front command therefore issued an order to extend the offensive. Each army tried to cross the river in its own operational zone, so that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army used the Pordenone-Prata-Fontanella-Tezze road as its extreme southern line of penetration for further operations.<sup>324</sup>

There were no more Italian soldiers east of the Tagliamento River on 1 November. Intercepted Italian radio messages made it clear that the retreat would continue to the Piave River. Given that Cadorna only issued the order on 4 November, this was a great success for the intelligence service.<sup>325</sup>

The group of von Hötzendorf's armies still received neither units nor material for the offensive, although a unique opportunity arose to destroy the entire Italian Front as well as the army. The excuse that there was a danger in recalling the German units was unacceptable, as it was the German Supreme Command that constantly called von Below for a coordinated action from the Soča River and Tyrol, which meant that the objective should have been to reach the Adige (*Slo. Adiža*) River and not the Piave River. It is also a fact that some of the German units remained in Italy until Christmas. Cadorna

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>325</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 320.

still had some hope on 2 November that the defence of the Tagliamento River could be strengthened. That hope died on 3 November, and on 4 November he issued an order to withdraw to the Piave River.

There were growing disagreements on the opposite side between the command of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army and the commands of both Soča Armies. It was difficult to persuade the armies to continue their penetration to the south-west after the two years of suffering on the Soča River, leaving all the spoils of war in the area of Udine and Codroipo. The disputes and disagreements made it impossible to capture part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Italian Army and cross the Tagliamento River in Madrisio as early as 1 November. The problem was also that the headquarters of the Austro-Hungarian armies were far inland: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's headquarters was in Logatec until 1 November; the 1<sup>st</sup> Army's was in Sežana; and the army group's headquarters was in Postojna. It turned out that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army command had better connections with the command of the South-West Front than with the neighbouring armies.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>326</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 251.

# PENETRATION TO THE PIAVE RIVER

## From the Tagliamento to the Piave River

The Austro-Hungarian and German units were to cross the Tagliamento River at Pinzano and Cornino on 4 November. Most of their units had not yet managed to cross the river, so the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Italian Armies had enough time to retreat to the Piave River, and cross it on 7 November.<sup>327</sup> The main culprit for the delay of the Austro-Hungarian units was, in von Below's opinion, Borojević, who forbade the units to continue their journey.

Borojević was waiting for the arrival of additional logistic supplies and heavy artillery, but the new situation was interrupted by Archduke Eugen, commander of the South-West Front, who ordered the advance at all costs.<sup>328</sup>

The Italian units in Carnia (*Slo. Karnija*) and General Di Robilant's Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army faced a difficult retreat, leaving many units trapped in the mountains. As many as 23,000 soldiers of the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army withdrew from the Brenta Valley to Monte Grappa and to the Piave River. The 4<sup>th</sup> Army had built a very good defence system in the mountains during the war with Austria-Hungary, but did not take advantage of it in the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive. It had to withdraw and consolidate its positions on Monte Grappa.

The orders of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Eugen on 4 November were to sever the ties between the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army and the Carnic group, and the remaining Italian units, and to link the German 14<sup>th</sup> Army with von Hötendorf's units on the Asiago Plateau. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army was given the task of reaching Belluno

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>328</sup> F. Fadini: *Caporetto*, p. 265.

and cutting off the communications of the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army as soon as possible. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army was originally intended to operate in the area on the left bank of the Piave River, while the right bank was to be under the jurisdiction of the 10<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Army coming from the north. Von Below disagreed, as his troops had reached the Piave River before the 10<sup>th</sup> Army.

He got permission to attack Longarone, which is on the right bank of the river. There were constant disagreements between Krauss and von Below about which communications Krauss would use to reach Belluno. Krauss was to operate on the communications leading to Belluno through the northern mountainous part. He disagreed, and von Below and von Dellmensingen were concerned about the speed of Krauss's units, which did not stop the withdrawal of the Italian units in time.<sup>329</sup>

On 10 November the command of the Austro-Hungarian South-West Front issued an order for Krauss's units to carry out an offensive on Monte Grappa. The 10<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Army were to remain in the rear area, and the Edelweiss Division rejoined the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, whose sector of operations was between Pederobba and Nervesa, where it advanced towards the Piave River. As early as 26 October the Italian government asked for the help of the British and the French, so that in November six French and five British divisions with over 200,000 soldiers came to the Italian Front. It became clear to Von Below that they needed to move quickly before the Allied units consolidated and reinforced their defensive positions. Von Dellmensingen and von Below demanded as much logistic support as possible in crossing the Piave River, in addition to advocating an 'as soon as possible' offensive across the river. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army was to penetrate onto the well-fortified Monte Grappa massif.<sup>330</sup>

On the opposite side, the task of the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army was to occupy positions on the Monte Grappa massif with the 51<sup>st</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> Divisions. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Divisions and the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps were to defend the Piave River between Pederobba and Nervesa. Cadorna had learned how strategically important the Monte Grappa Massif was from the Austro-Hungarian offensive in Trentino in

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<sup>329</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 151-152, 156.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

1916, also called the “Strafexpedition”, so he ordered its additional fortification, and built new roads leading there. Most communications were built in 1917.<sup>331</sup>

After occupying the bridges at Cornino and Pontaiba, it became clear to Cadorna that he should not delay the retreat to the Piave River. He issued an order to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies on the night of 3 to 4 November to withdraw to the right bank of the Piave River or the Monte Grappa Massif. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and the remaining parts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army crossed the Piave River between 8 and 9 November.<sup>332</sup>

The Soča armies crossed the Tagliamento River on 5 November, and the pursuit continued. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army broke through to the Livenza River on 7 November, and the Krauss Corps advanced with its right wing to the town of Longarone in the upper reaches of the Piave River. It was important to get there before the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army, which was retreating from Ampezzo and Cadore. The Austro-Hungarian 10<sup>th</sup> Army reached Cortina as early as 5 November, and the Italians used armoured vehicles for the first time in battles between the Tagliamento and the Piave River. The disbandment of the di Giorgio Corps enabled the attackers to cut off the withdrawal of part of the units from the Zona Carnia, so that the 63<sup>rd</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions were captured. Convinced that the Monte Grappa Massif was important for further penetration across the Piave River, the Krauss Corps was ordered to make its way as quickly as possible to the city of Belluno, and on to the city of Feltre to prevent the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army from conquering the Monte Grappa Massif. The Italians began to withdraw from the eastern border of South Tyrol on 7 November. They were followed by the Austro-Hungarian units, but the encirclement of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army was not very successful. The advance parties of the 13<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division broke through to the Piave River on 9 November, and learned that the Italian defences on the Piave River had been fortifying themselves since 25 October. Rumours also spread that many Allied soldiers had come to help the Italian army, but the 14<sup>th</sup> Division’s headquarters calculated that ten or twelve divisions could not unite until the end of November, and that there was enough time to pursue the Italians across the Adige River. The town of Belunno was occupied on 10 November, and units

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., pp. 158, 161.

<sup>332</sup> L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 253; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 323.

of both Soča armies arrived on the Piave River on the same day. The Italians destroyed several bridges and damaged most of the others.

Von Hötendorf's offensive began on 10 November with six divisions. The aim of the offensive was to conquer the Altopiano dei Sette Comuni (the Asiago Plateau) in order to prevent traffic through the Brenta Canyon and further into the valley. The units broke through to Gallio, but the Italian counterattack pushed them back to their starting positions. Von Hötendorf's idea of penetrating into the valley across the plateau did not materialize, while other directions were not tried. The troops managed to break through to the east and conquer the areas of Enego and Primolano, and awaited Krauss's units in Feltre. The Italians fortified their line of defence on the Piave River on 12 November, and the Allied forces began arriving at the Italian battlefield from the Western Front.<sup>333</sup>

There were many contradictions concerning the continuation of the offensive across the Piave River both during and after the war. This is understandable because the missed opportunity for a more severe defeat of the Italians, and a possible separate peace treaty, which Italy would have been forced to sign if the Austro-German forces had penetrated to the Adige and Po (*Slo. Pad*) River, meant the loss of the last chance to save the monarchy. The official position of Austria-Hungary was that there were not enough rested soldiers and pontoon material to cross the river, and that there was not enough artillery and ammunition. Although the Italians put up a surprisingly strong resistance to the Austro-Hungarian units on the southern edge of the Altopiano dei Sette Comuni, and even repulsed the Austro-Hungarian attack, it was impossible for them to recover and rearm by 10 or 15 November, and successfully resist the enemy's offensive in the lowlands. The Italians' western allies were also not yet able to intervene by the end of November. Three Bridgeheads were thus established on the Piave River: in the delta near the lagoons around Venice; in Zenson di Piave; and in San Bartolomeo and Fagaré near Treviso. The first two Bridgeheads were later voluntarily abandoned due to swamps, disease, and the impossible construction of shelters; and units from the northern Bridgehead had to surrender as they were left without support and supply. The Italians

<sup>333</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 253.

had to send minors into the battle to destroy this Bridgehead, as they had no other units.<sup>334</sup>

Instead of penetrating across the Piave River on a broad front together with the German units, they launched an attack across the Monte Grappa Massif, from north to south across the entire width; and the attempt to break through the Brenta Canyon failed. Prior to the invasion of the Monte Grappa Massif, General Krauss, who stubbornly defended his method of penetrating through the valley, argued that only the Italian outposts were deployed in the hills south of Feltre, that the advance of large units over the hills would be difficult and slow, and that it was therefore necessary to penetrate through the valleys of the Brenta and Piave Rivers. Despite the opposition of Generals von Wieden and Müller, the 1<sup>st</sup> Austro-Hungarian Corps was divided into two groups whose units mostly penetrated through the valley, while smaller groups marched along the slopes of the massif. Most were stopped at San Marino, and both groups suffered many losses. They thus failed to break through to the south. A company from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Regiment broke through over Monte Prassolan on 16 November, and into the then completely empty Monte Pertica below the summit of Monte Grappa, where weak Italian units were digging trenches; however, the battalion called the company back. Monte Pertica and Col di Buratto were occupied; the resistance was too great, and the opportunity was forever lost. Preventive Italian fortification of the Monte Grappa Massif began as early as 1916 under the impression of the South Tyrolean offensive in the May of the same year; the defence line along the southern edge of the massif was mostly completed during the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive. Underground artillery batteries covered the entire massif, and the Austro-Hungarian army only managed to “drag” some of the mountain artillery to the first positions. There were very few Austro-Hungarian reinforcements, and little was known about the strength of the Italian crews at the summit of Monte Grappa. The Austro-Hungarian units had broken through to the last Italian positions by December 1917, before descending into the lowlands; they suffered heavy losses, however, and there was no further talk of continuing the penetration. The summit of Monte Grappa remained unconquered.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, pp. 253-254.

<sup>335</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 254.



## Defence of the Carnic Alps and contradictions between the allies

The Italian border in the Carnic Alps was defended by the Carnic groups and the Italian 12<sup>th</sup> Corps, which had an independent command between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies, and was commanded by General Tassoni. This mountainous sector was protected by the 10<sup>th</sup> Army on the Austro-Hungarian side, and by the 26<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions of the 12<sup>th</sup> Corps on the Italian side. The 10<sup>th</sup> Army was ordered to put pressure on the Italian units at the beginning of the offensive, but it initially only carried out minor artillery attacks, and sent several patrols towards the Italians. When it became clear on 28 October that the 26<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions had to leave their positions and retreat to the Tagliamento River, the Austro-Hungarian 10<sup>th</sup> Army began to move west, and the main operations against the Italians in the Carnic Alps were carried out by the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. The Italian units received reinforcements on the Tagliamento River, as the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division joined the 26<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions.<sup>336</sup>

The main part of the attack was to be carried out by the German 14<sup>th</sup> Army, and the Austro-Hungarian 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Armies were to exert pressure on the retreating Italian units. The Austro-Hungarian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had insufficient ammunition supplies for its artillery, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Army only occasionally attacked with cannons due to its lack of ammunition. The Austro-Hungarian army wanted the command and authority of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army to extend south to the Plave-Cividale line. Emperor Karl I ordered that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's right wing be extended to the line Hill 1114-Cividale, which had previously belonged to the area of operation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Von Below protested and complained to Archduke Eugen, as this would have reduced the area of operation of the Berrer and Scotti Corps; in addition, the units of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army advanced so rapidly that the units of the Austro-Hungarian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army were unable to follow. Archduke Eugen accepted von Below's protest. Von Below was concerned about the slow advance of the Austro-Hungarian 10<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Armies. When the 10<sup>th</sup> Army had barely begun to move towards the Carnic group, the 26<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Italian divisions had already surrendered to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, which clearly indicated inconsistency in the operation of the Central Powers' armies.<sup>337</sup>

<sup>336</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 135.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136-139.

## ***FINAL PHASES OF THE OFFENSIVE***

### **Piave, Asiago and Monte Grappa**

On 12 November, the Italian armies were deployed along the new line of defence from Asiago to the Brenta Valley, across the Monte Grappa Massif to the right bank of the Piave River at Pederobba, and along the right bank of the Piave River to the sea. Six French and five British divisions came to help. The Italians formed a new Supreme Staff, and on 7 November the Italian King dismissed Cadorna, and appointed General Armando Diaz as Chief of Supreme Staff. Despite Capello's successful occupation of the Banjšice Plateau in the 11<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had completely destroyed its reputation with the catastrophe of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive; Aosta and his 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, however, had retained their reputation. The Italian king and Aosta were cousins, so the king did not want to appoint Aosta as Chief of Supreme Staff due to possible accusations, and opted for Diaz. Generals Gaetano Giardino and Pietro Badoglio became his assistants.

Diaz was considered more humane in relation to his subordinates, and the first thing he did after taking command was to order the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies to maintain the defence on the line from Cima della Caldiera near Monte Ortigara and all the way to Val Brenta. The 1<sup>st</sup> Army's response was that this was impossible given the previous order, which was withdrawal. The arrival of a new team of generals at the top of Supreme Staff (namely Diaz, Badoglio and Giardino) meant a breath of fresh air at the top of the Italian army. Cadorna had previously dismissed and replaced many officers, from lieutenant colonels to generals, without prior analysis and verification of their guilt or proof of their incompetence. Diaz, on the other hand, set up a special commission

to review the procedures for the removal or transfer of a number of Italian officers. Above all, he took care of the well-being of units, so that the soldiers received enough food, drink and other material goods, as well as additional military training.<sup>338</sup>

In early November Austria-Hungary decided that the offensive launched in October should be completed, and pressure should be put on the Italians along the entire South-West Front. The first attempt to cross the Piave River was organized by the Stein Corps on 10 November, when the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division reached the undamaged bridge near Vidor, but the Italians prevented the soldiers from crossing the bridge, and blew it up at night. All subsequent attempts in San Vito west of Valdobbiadene and elsewhere in the vicinity were prevented. The 13<sup>th</sup> Division, which was in the reserve of the Stein Corps, wanted to cross the Piave River near Mino south of Valdobbiadene, but failed to do so due to insufficient artillery support. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Austro-Hungarian Soča Armies wanted to cross the Piave River further south, and attack the positions of the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, but failed. They occupied Papadopoli Island on 13 November, but were unable to reach the other side of the river. Subsequent attempts to reach the right bank of the Piave River near Saletto on 16 November were unsuccessful; parts of the units managed to cross the river at Fagarè, but were quickly surrounded. Three powerful counterattacks forced the Austro-Hungarian units to retreat back across the river, and they left behind many cannons and about 300 prisoners. The Austro-Hungarian army organized several more local attacks near Eraclea. They managed to reach the areas of the old Piave riverbed, but the Italians successfully consolidated their new positions. The Austro-Hungarian army was met by well-fortified and morally strong Italian soldiers in Venice, who did not allow a breakthrough towards the city.<sup>339</sup>

On 10 November the Austro-Hungarian army began a massive attack on the Asiago Plateau, directed especially against the fortified positions on the Monte Melette Massif. Four Austro-Hungarian divisions were unsuccessful and, after heavy losses, abandoned offensive operations on the Asiago Plateau on 22 November.

<sup>338</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 191-194; M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 323.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army command on Monte Grappa ordered the Krauss Corps to advance in the direction of Feltre-Fonzaso, and occupy the entire area of the Monte Grappa Massif. On 13 November the Krauss units advanced from Belluno towards Feltre, which lies on the north-eastern side of the Monte Grappa Massif. General Krauss in Feltre did not have sufficient information on the state of defence on Monte Grappa, and it was only on 13 November that his scouts learned that the Italians there were well fortified. Krauss was concerned about delays in supplying his units with food and ammunition. Due to the ammunition supply problems and the delay of artillery units which were still on their way, Krauss determined that an attack on Monte Grappa would be very difficult, so he ordered his units to advance along the Piave and Brenta Valleys. The corps was divided in two groups: the group of General Schwarzenberg, commander of the 55<sup>th</sup> Division, which also included the Jäger Division; and the group of General von Wieden, commander of the Edelweiss Division, which also included the 43<sup>rd</sup> Brigade and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division. General Schwarzenberg's group advanced through the Piave Valley to Pederobba, and was supported by the Stein Corps' artillery. His other units advanced towards the Monte Tomba and Monte Palon Massifs. General Wieden's group advanced from Val Cismon and Val Brenta towards Bassano del Grappa and the village of Cismon on the Monte Asolone massif; the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division was in reserve near Feltre. Generals Wieden and Müller had doubts about the proposed operations in the Piave and Brenta Valleys. They expressed their concerns to Krauss, but he did not want to accept their proposals. The 55<sup>th</sup> Division faced strong resistance on 14 November near the village of Santa Maria. The Austro-Hungarian soldiers successfully occupied several Italian positions north of Monte Tessa during the day. General Wieden's second group advanced along the Val Cismon Valley, where it clashed with the Italians near Monte Pena, and drove them away from there. Although the Italians retained their positions near the towns of Roncone and Tomatio, the attackers were successful in occupying Roncone and Cismon the following day, 15 November. After that, the advance along the Brenta Valley was halted. General Krauss was concerned about the slow advance along the Piave Valley on 15 November. He concluded that the route through the Piave Valley was only safe if he took control of the Monte Grappa Massif, especially Monte Tomba and Monfenera, so he ordered all units to attack Monte Tomba. The attack was carried out on the

morning of 18 November, due to the slow advance of the Austro-Hungarian units, and the slow supply of ammunition. Krauss's units attacked Monte Tomba, Monfenera, Fontana Secca, Spinoncia, and Pertica. All the attacks were unsuccessful and were quickly halted; in addition, Krauss's units suffered heavy losses. The shortage of ammunition, food, and water greatly affected the morale of Krauss' units.

Generals von Dellmensingen and von Below felt that General Krauss was to blame for the failure on Monte Grappa when he ordered his units to advance through the Brenta and Piave Valleys, which the Italians had resolutely defended with units from the Monte Grappa Massif. General Below ordered the redeployment of units, and organized a new attack on the Monte Grappa Massif on 18 November, but all the attacks were more or less unsuccessful. The yield of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army on 26 November was poor. The Italians retained their positions on Col della Berretta, Pertica, Col dell'Orso, and Spinoncia. The only success of the attackers was the Austro-Hungarian occupation of part of Monte Tomba, but the Italians still successfully held the defence line on its southern side.

The number of Austro-Hungarian casualties on Asiago on 22 November was so high that Emperor Karl I ordered a temporary suspension of the offensive to avoid many new losses. The Emperor visited Krauss on 23 November, who doubted the success of the advance on the Monte Grappa Massif. He then visited von Below on 24 November, and wanted to persuade him to end the offensive as it made no sense to continue fighting, but von Below disagreed. Von Below received a memorandum from the German command the next day that the risk of the offensive was increasing due to the delays. This also made von Below concerned about the slow advance of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, especially the Edelweiss Division, which was to occupy Colle di Brenta. Von Dellmensingen and von Below were concerned about the poor progress of the Austro-Hungarian allies, Krauss's units, and the remainder of the Austro-Hungarian armies. Von Below received a message from Archduke Eugen on 2 December that the offensive had been halted. It was important for the 14<sup>th</sup> Army to continue advancing along the mountains, and give the impression that the offensive was not yet over. The German Supreme Command decided on 14 December that the German units should leave Italy.

The fighting continued on the Piave River and the Asiago Plateau in December. The Italian army received additional reinforcements from the French and British units. There were minor attacks by the Austro-Hungarian army, which, however, did not change the position on the front. The number of casualties was high on both sides, especially on the Asiago Plateau, where the Austro-Hungarian army had lost 23,000 men in November alone (dead, missing, wounded, and sick); the Italian 29<sup>th</sup> Division lost 539 officers and 14,236 soldiers (11,000 were captured) in the attack on Melette on 4 and 5 December. The 4<sup>th</sup> Italian Army almost completely stopped the 14<sup>th</sup> Army on Monte Grappa. The 4<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division occupied parts of Col della Berretta and the Asolone area on 11 December. All the German units, except the 5<sup>th</sup> Division which occupied the area of Monte Spinoncia, were less successful. The German units were successful in occupying the Italian positions in Salarol on the following days. They occupied the Italian positions below Valderoi at an altitude of 1385m on 13 November, but were unsuccessful in advancing towards Coll dell'Orso. The German units were successful in occupying the northern part of Salarol on 17 December, but the Italians prevented them from advancing further towards Coll dell'Orso. The 4<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Division was successful in occupying the summit of Asolone on 18 December in the western part of Monte Grappa. We can thus conclude that the 14<sup>th</sup> Army did gain some territory through their offensive operations, but the losses were great. The attackers were hampered by high snow, and the battle for Monte Grappa was almost over when the Italians occupied its key strategic positions. Many Italian positions were occupied by French units in December (fortunately for the Italians), who recaptured parts of the seized territory which was lost by the Italian army on 22 November. The Austro-Hungarian and German soldiers suffered heavy losses in the battles with the French, and they had to retreat from Monte Tomba and Monte Palon towards Alano. Units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Italian Army retained positions on Monte Grappa; the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was disbanded; and the German divisions were sent to other fronts.<sup>340</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive thus ceased at the end of November 1917. A total of 117 Austro-Hungarian and German battalions defeated 238 Italian battalions,

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<sup>340</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 195-211.

and in fifteen days the front was moved 120 kilometres to the west. As many as 293,943 Italian soldiers were captured; and 97 long-range cannons, 1577 medium and heavy calibre cannons, 1462 field and mountain cannons, 1732 mortars, and large quantities of food and other military material were seized. The numbers of wounded, dead, and captured soldiers in both the German and Austro-Hungarian forces, as well as on the Italian side, which appear in Slovenian and foreign professional literature today vary greatly. The Austro-Hungarian and German losses during the offensive were estimated at about 67,000 men, of whom less than 10,000 were dead (including 2000 Germans). Estimates of Italian casualties range between 11,000 and 12,000 soldiers; 20,000 to 30,000 were wounded and 280,000 captured. The Italians lost 14,000m<sup>2</sup> of area which was inhabited by 1,150,000 people. About 400,000 civilians left their homes.<sup>341</sup>

The number of Italian victims was around 560,000 according to the latest studies, which is a significantly lower number than in the first post-war studies, in which the number of victims ranged between 650,000 and 709,000.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> M. Thompson: *The White War*, p. 324; L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 255; M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra*, p. 381.

<sup>342</sup> A. Fornasin: *The Italian Army's Losses in the First World War, Population* (English edition), Vol. 72, Number 1, 2017, pp. 39-62.

## WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEFEAT?

The first people to blame for the Italian defeat, and those who carry the greatest responsibility, were the Italian Supreme Command and General Cadorna, who did not know how to organize defence, and the army's defensive way of thinking. Cadorna blamed the soldiers for the fall of the front, mainly their inappropriate behaviour and low morale. But part of the responsibility for the defeat lies with the senior Italian officers at Army and Corps commands, even in the weeks and months preceding the offensive. Communication between the supreme command and both Armies' commands was poor. It was clear that many commanders interpreted the received orders in their own way, or did not comply with them at all.

The Italian military leadership did not know much about tactical innovations developed by other armed forces during the war, especially on the Western Front. When visiting the Italian Front in 1917, the French General Weygand and the British General Robertson were concerned about the depth of the Italian defence and the poor cooperation between infantry and artillery. During the greater part of the war, the Italian Armed Forces, especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, were in offensive mode and were not used to organizing defence. In addition to denying the role of intelligence reports, Cadorna overestimated the efficiency and competence of the Italian defence in the Upper Soča Region, and did not ensure morale among his soldiers. Another problem was authority and the noncompliance with orders of his subordinate unit commanders, especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army and its corps. Of the 29 reserve brigades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, not even one was deployed in the northern part of the hinterland of the Soča Front, and the same is also true of medium and heavy artillery. Communication between Capello and Cadorna was especially poor. Capello, in personality the



total opposite of Cadorna, was considered a successful conqueror of Banjšice. There were even rumours spreading among politicians and journalists that he would replace Cadorna.

Capello was undoubtedly one of the main culprits of the Italian defeat, because the released documents show that he ignored Cadorna's orders about defence organization, and despite talking all the time about counteroffensive preparations, he did not organize them. While he was receiving hospital treatment, General Montuori was appointed as a temporary commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army.

On 23 October, Capello returned to his command in Krmin. By then it had become obvious that a Central Powers offensive was about to start. On that day, he visited the Supreme Command of the Italian Armed Forces in Videm, since he conducted meetings with the commanders of his corps. On the following day, 24 October, he was still giving out the last orders and commands, but fell seriously ill in the evening, so he had to hand over command to Montuori again. He was sent to the military hospital in Padova and later to Verona.<sup>343</sup>

In the area of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps under the command of General Cavaciocchi, the Italian defence was poorly organized. The corps covered mainly mountain terrain, so nobody expected an attack in this sector. The corps was not in the best shape with regard to morale, tactics or strategy. The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps even missed the opportunity to participate in the conference of corps commanders of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army on 19 September, where defensive strategy was discussed. Cavaciocchi convinced Cadorna's officers, coming to exercise control, that their defence was efficient and that unit morale was high. He repeatedly assured them that he did not need anything and that the promised artillery shipment had not yet arrived. Then, on 22 October, he was already having second thoughts about the preparedness of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, so he wanted to fortify the 50<sup>th</sup> Division's defence positions.

On 22 October, Cadorna visited his command in Kreda, not wanting to interfere in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's operational orders, but showing concern about the

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<sup>343</sup> M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat: *La Grande Guerra*, p. 372; J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 70-73.

Bovec offensive. Cadorna gave orders to the 34<sup>th</sup> Division to move from the area of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps to the plain at Žaga, and thus further reinforce this part of the front. As a result of reorganization, the Division only had the Foggia Brigade (280<sup>th</sup>, 281<sup>st</sup> and 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiments), which joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps on 23 October, and then Cavaciocchi also added the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiments to the 43<sup>rd</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and the 280<sup>th</sup> Regiment to the 50<sup>th</sup> Division. In the end, the 34<sup>th</sup> Division, which Cadorna sent towards Žaga, included only the 281<sup>st</sup> and 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiments. The 281<sup>st</sup> Regiment was eventually sent to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Division, and the 282<sup>nd</sup> Regiment to the 46<sup>th</sup> Division, so the 34<sup>th</sup> Division was left with no units.

On 23 October, Capello was worried about the situation in the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, and for this reason he personally ordered some unit movements with the aim of fortifying the defence of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps. He sent two brigades, the Potenza and the Massa Carrara, to close off the area west of Kobarid, and two alpine units to the Žaga surroundings and to the Stol area. These units were supposed to be supported by 17 heavy calibre batteries. In the end, a high percentage of units had not reached the areas where they were to organize defence by the deadline.<sup>344</sup>

General Pietro Badoglio, who commanded the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, was also responsible for the Italian defeat. He had earned promotion to the rank of General and a good reputation with the Italian public with the conquest of Sabotin during the 6<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. In less than a year, he was promoted from the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and Chief of Command in the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army to the General and Commander of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps. After the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, he was heavily criticized for presumably not having contact with his divisions, and for his cannons going silent on the day of the offensive. Badoglio was constantly talking about counteroffensive organization in the area from Banjšice to Tolmin, but he did not take any action. Soon after the offensive began, he lost contact with his subordinates, and also had poor connections with the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Corps. He was receiving numerous reports from the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 64<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Divisions, and almost none from the 19<sup>th</sup> Division, deployed to the critical part of the front penetration. In the first hours after the offensive

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<sup>344</sup>J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, p. 74-76.

launched, the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 64<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Divisions reported that they were holding their positions, while the 19<sup>th</sup> Division was cut off from the outside world, so he received the first news on developments in its area only in the afternoon of 24 October. General Villani, Commander of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division, reported heavy bombardment and cut lines of communication. Soon afterwards, the Badoglio command received reports containing information about the success of the enemy offensive, which also forced his units to retreat, desert and flee. Although the Italian Parliamentary Commission of inquiry, investigating the causes of the Soča Front defeat, accused Badoglio as one of the main culprits for the disintegration of the Italian Front, he did not suffer any repercussions. When the Commission's report was published after the war ended,<sup>345</sup> Italy was already the victor of the war and Badoglio a national hero, further pursuing a successful military career.<sup>346</sup>

General Bongiovanni took command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps seven days before the beginning of the offensive. The corps' tasks were mainly security of the Matajur-Kolovrat area, defence support, ensuring reserve forces for the flanks of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Corps and, at the right moment, also counteroffensive organization.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and the Napoli Brigade were fortifying the defence line in the hinterland of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps, especially in the Kolovrat, Hill 1114 and Livek areas. On 22 October, Bongiovanni gave orders for two Bersaglieri Regiments to move to the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, where the 34<sup>th</sup> Division was supposed to replace them. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, with the Arno, Elba, Firenze and Napoli Brigades, was given the task of defending the Kuk-Hill 1114 area and the 19<sup>th</sup> Division hinterland. Bongiovanni sent the Napoli Brigade to the strategically important area of Ježa, while the 34<sup>th</sup> Division was sent to the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps and was supposed to be replaced by the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division.

Just before the offensive, the greatest problem in redeploying the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps units was that they did not reach the areas in which they were supposed to fortify the defence line and exercise defence in the event of an attack from the enemy during the expected time period. Thus, the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division was ordered

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<sup>345</sup> Ten pages describing the operations of General Badoglio as the commander of the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps went missing from the Parliamentary Commission report.

<sup>346</sup> J. and E. Wilks: *Rommel and Caporetto*, pp. 78-82.

to occupy the positions of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division and guard the defence line from Kuk to Matajur, which of course was not carried out due to lack of time. On the day of the offensive, all the Corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army were left to their own devices due to cut communication lines, which was also obvious in the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps. General Bongiovanni complained about the cut lines; when they were operating normally, the information from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Command was the complete opposite of the actual situation in the field.<sup>347</sup>

Thus, the Italian artillery was inactive on the day of the offensive, exercising successful defence only in some sections of the front. Because of their leadership, command and control principles, artillery crew commanders lacked self-initiative, so they often waited for orders which they then did not receive. Despite the burden of the subordinate commanders and following orders of the superiors, Cadorna had already issued an order before the offensive which included directives that the artillery counterattack was to be launched immediately after the enemy attack.

The problem with Badoglio was that he wanted to control the entire combat operations of his subordinate units. On 24 October, the 27<sup>th</sup> Corps Artillery Commander waited for Badoglio to approve fire initiation. Badoglio could not approve the action as all connections were interrupted. At 6:30am, Badoglio ordered fire initiation to his medium and heavy calibre artillery, but they did not begin firing.<sup>348</sup> We must bear in mind that the area of the Tolmin Basin was mostly calm during the Soča Front combats. The most poorly trained Italian Army units were placed there with a large proportion of soldiers from the workers' uprising areas, who were not considered to be motivated and determined fighters.<sup>349</sup>

The report of the Italian Parliamentary Commission of inquiry, published by the Commission in 1919, shows that the responsibility for the defeat was more widely shared. Everybody taking part in the Kobarid defeat sought to salvage their reputation and shift responsibility onto somebody else. After the war, many commanders wrote personal memoirs, trying to shake the blame for

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid., p. 83-84.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 86-87.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

the defeat; we can read the memoirs of Generals Cadorna<sup>350</sup> and Capello,<sup>351</sup> each analyzing the causes of the Kobarid defeat in their own way. In 1967, the historical institute of the General Staff of the Italian Armed Forces (*Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito*) published the official Italian history, summarizing the events at Kobarid. We should also not forget numerous other authors, right up to the present day, summing up the reasons for the Kobarid defeat in an authentic and increasingly critical way.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> L. Cadorna: *La guerra alla fronte Italiana: fino all'arresto sulla linea della Piave e del Grappa*, Milano 1921.

<sup>351</sup> L. Capello: *Caporetto, perché?: la 2. armata e gli avvenimenti dell'ottobre 1917*, Torino 1967.

<sup>352</sup> Worth mentioning are especially the last two monographs by Nicole Labance, PhD (N. Labanca: *Caporetto: storia e memoria di una disfatta*, Bologna 2017) and Marco Mondini PhD (M. Mondini: *Il Capo: La Grande Guerra del generale Luigi Cadorna*, Bologna 2017), which critically assess the role of the Italian Army and General Cadorna in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive.

## MOUNTAIN WARFARE AND THE 12<sup>TH</sup> SOČA OFFENSIVE

As already stated in the chapter on the military analysis of the geographical area, the Upper Soča Region was classified as mountain area, mostly medium mountains with a few characteristics of high mountains. Thus, the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive has strong characteristics of mountain warfare. At the height of the attack mountain and jäger units were therefore mostly chosen and used, already experienced in this field and physically prepared for above-average physical strain. Physical fitness, especially in the first critical 48 hours of the offensive, was the core prerequisite for the units to reach the stage goals, which were on peaks and Ridges above the Soča River as the predominant structures, suitable for shaping the conditions for the continuation of the attack. This fact has already been pointed out in the first assessment by the Chief of Staff of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>353</sup>

In a tactical sense, the medium and high mountains between Bovec and Tolmin favoured defenders whose main effort was defence of the dominant peaks and ridges. Geographically speaking, the attacking units faced four significant natural obstacles: viewed from north to south, the major natural obstacle of the first Italian defence line was the Vršič-Kal-Krn Ridge; on the second defence line was the Polovnik Ridge; and the Stol, Kolovrat and Matajur Ridges were on the third one. All these Ridges run in an east-west direction. The entire battlespace was distinctly limited by the Soča River, pushing its way in an S-shape through the Ridges from the Bovec direction, over the Žaga Defile, to Kobarid and Tolmin, and splitting the whole battlespace into two parts. An additional obstacle was the high water level during the offensive,

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<sup>353</sup>L. Galić, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 293.

making a crossing away from the bridges impossible. In addition, due to the fresh snow (up to half a metre) and ice passage through the high mountains was difficult, and mostly impossible.

To the defenders, these natural barriers gave a false sense of security and a tactical advantage over the attackers from the topographical point of view. For the attackers, the natural barriers were a challenge and also a test of their capabilities. Experience from the previous two years, mostly from the battlefields of mountainous Romania, helped the German Alpine Corps units, the only ones trained for mountain warfare in the German Armed Forces at that time. The rapid breakthrough on the first day of the attack in the Bovec-Žaga and Tolmin-Kobarid-Kred directions gave the impression that the main effort of operations was transferred from the peaks and Ridges to the valleys, when it comes to the general principles of mountain warfare tactics. But if we examine orders and attack plans, and the course of the operation as a whole, we realize that the attack followed the classic principles of mountain warfare, which almost entirely still apply in non-snowy mountainous terrain.

Within the framework of general principles of mountain warfare tactics, we can distinguish three main attack directions in the mountainous terrain: through valleys, over Ridges, or along the lines of communication. From the topographical point of view, attack through the valley is the fastest and easiest option because of its passability and communications. The downside of such an attack is that valleys narrow manoeuvre space; the units are consequently stretched and exposed to flank counterattacks.

For light infantry, the main effort of the attack is in the mountains along the ridges and peaks, mostly because:

- Attacks along the Ridges allow penetration deep into the enemy's defence;
- Decisive points of attack in the valley are more easily conquered from higher-lying ground;
- A successful attack along the Ridge divides the enemy's battle formation and breaks its defence system;
- It is easier to defend the flanks on the Ridge than in the valley.<sup>354</sup>

<sup>354</sup>M. Kuhar: *Taktika bojevanja v gorah*, Ljubljana 2008, p. 63.

In a book on the history of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion it is written that an “attack which is limited to a valley should only be used in emergency situations; conflict for higher-lying areas opens valleys. The principle still stands: the one who owns the higher-lying areas also owns valleys.”<sup>355</sup>

This same book hints at existing differences in the priorities of operations tactics. Higher commands (corps, army) advocated the valley breakthrough. Members of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion were of the opinion that the combination of a simultaneous slow breakthrough along the Ridges and valleys was the best version of the operation, with a breakthrough along Ridges and higher-lying areas still being a priority. The valleys are mostly used for movements of reserve units, artillery and provisions.<sup>356</sup>

The commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, General Otto von Below, also stressed the importance of higher-lying mountain areas. “The decision principle of any offensive action in the mountains is to win and hold the peaks in order to move towards the next objective as if there was a natural bridge between them /.../ Each column on higher-lying areas must advance without hesitation. In this way, we create conditions for the neighbouring forces who cannot advance in the enemy’s depth by bypassing it; we thus besiege the enemy.”<sup>357</sup>

This statement clearly expresses two main messages which were a foundation for a successful breakthrough: the use of the classic principles of mountain warfare with the main effort along the Ridges, which topographically represent a tactical advantage, and the principle of deep penetration.

The principle of an attack along the Ridge was also used by Rommel and his detachment on the Hlevnik Ridge. Based on the plan of attack, the determined general direction went over the Hlevnik northern slope, with the first target in the hamlet of Foni. As he reached the Hlevnik Ridge during the infiltration, he asked himself whether to advance along the Ridge or retreat back to the northern slope. His decision for advancement over the Ridge to the top of

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<sup>355</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 265.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>357</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 125.



Hlevnik was based on his assessment that it would be easier to conquer the Italian positions from the top along the slope.<sup>358</sup>

The units getting ready for the attack were from the point of view of a geographical area in a distinctly inferior position. The elevation difference between Tolmin and the Kolovrat Ridge is nearly 1000m. In this area, there was only one place giving the 14<sup>th</sup> Army advantage over the defenders.

This spot was Mrzli vrh (1360m) above Tolmin, where the Astro-Hungarian defence positions were higher-lying than the Italian ones. The 50<sup>th</sup> Division's units took full advantage of the situation and carried out an attack from three different directions from the top to the Soča Valley. In this way, they formed the conditions for a rapid breakthrough of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division in the Tolmin-Kobarid direction, at the same time protecting their right flank.

When analyzing the operations in the main direction of the attack from the Tolmin direction, we need to bear in mind that the weather influenced the course of the attack on 24 October. Visibility was very poor due to the rain, especially during the morning. Lieutenant Hermann Balck, at the time commander of the machine gun company in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jäger Regiment, describes in his book that, due to smoke, fog and rain, the visibility in the Tolmin Basin on that morning was limited to less than 300m.<sup>359</sup> This means that the battlespace was divided into several smaller separated battlefields, and mutual unit support on Ridges and in valleys was not possible. In this area, the field of vision was significantly greater in favourable visibility conditions.

This is also one of the important reasons why the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division were able to penetrate the valley towards Kobarid quite freely. It should be noted that the visibility situation changed completely on 25 October, since the day was clear and sunny. The attack progression towards the main and auxiliary directions shows that the attacking units paid less attention to direct contact with neighbouring units and more to how to reach the higher-lying areas as soon as possible. In the main direction, these were the Ježa, Kolovrat and Matajur Ridges, and the Polovnik and Stol Ridges in the auxiliary direction.

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<sup>358</sup> E. Rommel: *Preboj pri Tolminu 1917*, p. 17.

<sup>359</sup> H. Balck: *Order in Chaos*, p. 67.

The units attacked simultaneously at top speed. Artillery fire support was difficult to coordinate since the units were not in a linear battle formation.<sup>360</sup>

The breakthrough through the Soča Valley in the Tolmin-Kobarid direction was of great tactical importance. The assault and infantry units already infiltrated deep into the Italian defence system on the first day. They cut off the units in the Krn mountain range from the hinterland, and cut the Italian defence system into two separate parts. In doing so, they exploited the Soča River, separating the two battlefields, and using this natural obstacle to the maximum. The Germans conquered two important passages on the Soča River, at Idrsko and the Napoleon Bridge at Kobarid (the Italians destroyed this themselves). By carrying out a breakthrough to the village of Kred and because of the units penetrating in the Bovec-Žaga-Kobarid auxiliary direction, the Italian units on the Stol Ridge were also cut off.

The central focus or key geographical area in this region was already clearly established during the attack planning. This was the Kolovrat and Matajur Ridge on which there were some decisive points: Hill 1114, Kuk, Livek and Matajur. When it came to the opening of the Livek Saddle, the importance lay with the German Alpine Corps' units, making a breakthrough on 25 October over the Kolovrat Ridge from the Tolmin direction, closing the Livek Pass from the south, carrying out the main attack from the top from the Kuk direction towards Livek, and making it possible for the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division's units to reach the Livek Pass. In accordance with orders, in the afternoon of 24 October the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division was immediately directed from Idrsko towards Livek, and was already north of the hamlet of Golobi in combat contact by 24 October at 3:30pm.<sup>361</sup> Later, the remaining units of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment also joined the attack.<sup>362</sup> The area north of Golobi was, from a geographical point of view, easily defensible terrain due to the very steep land between Idrsko and Golobi. The Italian defence was based on the main hills of Frtin (719m) and Hlevišče (775m), from which they had a good overview of the Idrsko approaches and could organize crossfire. In

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<sup>360</sup> B. I. Gudmundsson: *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 133.

<sup>361</sup> L. Galič, B. Marušič: *Tolminsko mostišče 1*, p. 206.

<sup>362</sup> P. Gaspari: *La verita su Caporetto*, p. 91.

addition, artillery projectiles on the steep rocky slope were devastating. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment spent more than 20 hours trying to carry out a breakthrough, but they succeeded only after an attack by the German Alpine Corps' units from higher-lying grounds east of Livek. The Italian defence at Golobi was broken on 25 October by the 8<sup>th</sup> Company of the Leib Regiment, which attacked the enemy from the direction of the top of Kuk with direct machine gun support. The tactical position at Golobi clearly shows the advantage of the higher-lying areas.

In the end, we must stress the advantages of the German officers, who had emphasized military topography in the training framework and achieved a high skill level in using topographic maps. This was very important for a swift breakthrough in the planned directions towards the objectives. Moving across the unknown, diverse, and vegetation-covered terrain in low visibility (fog, dark) demanded that the commanding officers pay attention not only to the tactical position, but also their topographic map.

In military topography, important officer skills included recognizing key terrain and using mountainous terrain as a tactical advantage. All these aspects and experience were important for the development of the mountain units and the tactics of mountain warfare after World War I.

## ERWIN ROMMEL IN THE 12<sup>TH</sup> SOČA OFFENSIVE<sup>363</sup>

Erwin Rommel is considered a prominent military historical personage, in our memories inseparable from the German military march in North Africa between 1941 and 1943, and with the nickname “Desert Fox” earned by good tactical operations in desert warfare. He also became known to the global public through his death in October 1944, when he was required to die at Adolf Hitler’s request in relation to information concerning preparations for the assassination of Hitler – he was allegedly forced to commit suicide. In connection to Rommel and his role during World War II, numerous myths and legends appeared soon after the end of the war. They were connected to propaganda, which claimed he was an apolitical personage, not connected to the Nazi regime, a brilliant and humane commander. After 1945, Rommel’s role during the war pushed aside all other milestones in his professional career, although there were numerous book, newspaper and magazine publications dedicated to them, and he also aroused the interest of television from time to time. This finding ultimately also holds true for Rommel’s hyper-successful operations in World War I. The successes of young Rommel during World War I in current publications are often limited to the role of prehistory compared to the later success of the “Desert Fox”, and scientific biographies of Erwin Rommel mostly dedicate only a few pages to the World War I period.

In recent years, more and more writing has been dedicated to the role of Erwin Rommel in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, which Rommel also described in his famous

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<sup>363</sup> For more information on the role of Erwin Rommel on the Italian Front see: W. Mährle: Erwin Rommel und das Württembergische Gebirgsbataillon in der 12. Soča-Schlacht – Wahrnehmung und Deutung eines militärischen Erfolgs, in: *Erwin Rommel. Geschichte und Mythos* (= *Stuttgarter Symposion, Schriftenreihe, Bd. 13*), Leinfelden-Echterdingen 2009, pp. 17-53.

book “Infantry Attacks” (Infanterie greift an) of 1937. Rommel’s publication stems from the time when he was an instructor at the Dresden Infantry School (1929-1933) and a course leader at the Potsdam Infantry School (from 1935). The book had the role of unit handbook and was also written for propaganda purposes, thus soon becoming a bestseller. Approximately 400,000 copies had been sold by 1945.

From the contents of this book we already know that the detachment of First Lieutenant Erwin Rommel was operating within the Württemberg Mountain Battalion under the leadership of Major Theodor Sprösser, and was included in the first battle lines of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive from the start. The Württemberg Mountain Battalion was part of the German Alpine Corps, which was part of the Stein Corps of the 14<sup>th</sup> German Army which broke the front line in the Tolmin Basin. The Württemberg elite formation had to penetrate to the right of the Bavarian Leib Regiment over the northern slope of Hlevnik towards the settlement of Foni, where its mission was to destroy the Italian batteries and then to follow the Leib Regiment on the right flank over Kolovrat towards the summit of Matajur. Rommel made significant changes to the original breakthrough plan and took advantage of his audacity, initiative and terrain advantages. Supported by Major Sprösser, who supported and defended the young First Lieutenant’s initiative, Rommel climbed Matajur with his unit just 52 hours after the offensive had begun. In doing this, he captured 150 Italian officers, 9000 Italian soldiers and 84 cannons. In three days of offensive, the losses of Rommel’s unit comprised six dead and 30 wounded. In the following days, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion fought near Cividale del Friuli and then penetrated all the way to the Tagliamento River with other German and Austro-Hungarian units. On 1 November 1917, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion was attached to the Krauss Corps. Despite many misunderstandings with his superior commanders, Rommel continued to move from one success to another (for example at Cimolais and Longarone). When the front on the Piava River again turned into a positional one, the members of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion continued to fight unsuccessfully on the Monte Grappa Massif for some time, until they were removed from the Italian battlefield in January 1918.

We must bear in mind that today Rommel is often given too great an importance in the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive, since his unit was only part of a large structure of the 14<sup>th</sup> German Army. Similar success can be attributed to many other German officers, for example, Hermann Balck and Ferdinand Schörner. Today, Rommel is the most well-known personage mainly due to his book, which offers a study on breakthrough tactics and innovations in the field of command (*auftragstaktik, mission command*). At the same time, we must bear in mind that the book is a personal testimony, in which Rommel glorifies himself and the role of the entire Württemberg Mountain Battalion. In the book, he often forgets about the chain of command and control, avoids describing other units' accomplishments, and does not mention logistic support for his unit or how he handled the problem of prisoners.

In the preceding chapters, we learnt that Major Theodor Sprösser and First Lieutenant Erwin Rommel were decorated for successful military actions by the German Emperor himself, namely with the military medal *Pour le Mérite*. But the road to this prestigious decoration was undoubtedly difficult for both Württemberg officers.

Military obstacles in a narrow sense were not the only hindrance for them; there were also problems with proving their successes. The Württemberg military mountaineers were considered to be assigned the tasks in the German units which promised military success and recognition. But the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive gave opportunities not only to the Württemberg members, but also to other units of various fiercely competitive German states. Here, the competitiveness between the Württemberg members and the Bavarians deserves the main emphasis. The contents of this book have already taught us that the starting position of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion within the German Alpine Corps was unfavourable, because its commanding officer was Bavarian Commander General von Tutschek, and the Corps was assigned to the Stein Corps, also under the command of a Bavarian General. For the Württemberg members, it was dangerous to exercise auxiliary tasks for other units, mostly Bavarian, which had already become a reality in battles in Romania during the winter of 1916-17. There was a strong fear that the Württemberg members would be demoted, which showed soon after the

battles started when Sprösser and Rommel fell out with the Bavarian Leib Infantry Regiment. The disagreement sparked off under Hill 1114, which needed to be conquered during the Kolovrat Ridge ascent. The leader of the Bavarian Leib Regiment, Major Bothmer, banned Rommel and his detachment from exercising offensive operations at this high position on the evening of 24 October 1917.

The objective of this ban was for the Bavarian units to reserve exclusive opportunity to receive military decorations by conquering Hill 1114. As we already know by now, the plan was a success, since the commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Company of the Leib Infantry Regiment, Lieutenant Ferdinand Schörner, who like Rommel became Field Marshal during World War II, succeeded in establishing control over the Italian high position, for which he received the Pour le Mérite medal, the only Bavarian Lieutenant to obtain this decoration.

After Rommel's detachment successfully conquered Matajur on 26 October 1917, another unexpected problem emerged. Rommel hoped that he would be rewarded with a Pour le Mérite medal for his achievement, in the same way that Schörner was; instead, General Otto von Below, who had promised "a blue Max" for conquering Matajur, gave it to the Silesian Lieutenant Schnieber, and not to Rommel. We have already said in the preceding chapter that Schnieber conquered the hill of Visoka Glava under the peak of Matajur, and notified the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division using radio communication. There, his military success was blown out of proportion, so the Silesian officer was mistakenly recognized as the conqueror of Matajur, for which the Emperor decorated him with a Pour le Mérite. Rommel, who felt cheated in relation to his achievement, was awarded a prestigious German decoration later, together with Major Sprösser, for the military action of 24 and 25 October on Kolovrat, the Matajur conquest and capturing a retiring Italian Division at the town of Longarone. For lower-grade officers, it was rare to receive a Pour le Mérite before 1917, as was the case for Theodor Sprösser and Erwin Rommel, so this was something special in itself. The fact that the Major and First Lieutenant, members of the same unit, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, received a prestigious decoration,

proves that their military achievements were seen as exceptional in the eyes of their contemporaries.<sup>364</sup>

For the young First Lieutenant Rommel, recognition of his military achievements also paid off professionally. While Sprösser led the mountain battalion all the way to May 1918, when he was seriously injured in the “Chemin des Dames” battle, Rommel was reassigned to a staff function in February 1918. In the last few months of the war, the young, “extremely capable officer”, according to the assessment of the Württemberg Ministry of War, was also given the opportunity to perform in front of the public as a military expert. And this despite the fact that he was very reluctant to accept this function.

The scandal surrounding the awarding of Pour le Mérite decoration left a mark on Erwin Rommel and taught him a lot at the same time. The young Württemberg officer was struck by the painful realization that military competence and success are never enough for appropriate recognition. The main importance is given to media propaganda of military success and contacts among the military and political elite, which Rommel took great advantage of later in life. Rommel was a media persona, and the media take a share of the credit for his popularity. In this context, we must also understand the release of his famous book, which was, as already stated, published for propaganda purposes. Its main goal was to show the Bavarians who was better.

In 1926, a two-part publication “Breakthrough on the Soča River” (*Der Durchbruch am Soča*) was published by a former Chief of Staff of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, retired Bavarian Artillery General Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen. The publication immediately sparked heated protests from numerous officers and generals who had taken part in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. Thus a lively German-Austrian-Italian discussion ensued between 1926 and 1927 on the military evaluation of the Central Powers' breakthrough in autumn 1917. The fierce reaction mainly came from the side of the Austrian General Alfred Krauss, commanding officer of the units at the Bovec breakthrough, Theodor Sprösser, and Erwin Rommel. Krauss, Sprösser and Rommel voiced their criticism

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<sup>364</sup> W. Mährle: Erwin Rommel und das Württembergische Gebirgsbataillon in der 12. Soča-Schlacht – Wahrnehmung und Deutung eines militärischen Erfolgs, pp. 29-33.



immediately after the publication of Dellmensingen's book, explaining their view on the offensive. In relation to this disagreement, it is known that there was a trip to the Soča Region and other parts of Italy which Rommel visited in 1927 with his wife Lucie. This is when detailed drawings and descriptions, the foundation for his famous book, were created.<sup>365</sup>

Although military-historical discussions in the Weimar Republic already clearly indicated that Erwin Rommel was carefully considering how he would defend the significance of the war events in autumn 1917 together with like-minded Württemberg officers, we can observe a similar behavioural style during the National Socialism period. In the Third Reich, the explanations of the Soča battles in general, and especially of the Erwin Rommel operations, nevertheless changed. This was the result of Rommel's professional rise. The Württemberg holder of the Pour le Mérite decoration, whose military career was put on hold during the period of the Weimar Republic, mainly because of the provisions of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, was rising quickly in the military hierarchy during the National Socialism period. In 1935, the former Major was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, in 1937 to Colonel, in 1939 to Major General, in 1941 to Lieutenant General and finally in 1942 to Colonel General and then to Field Marshal. Rommel's swift rise was accompanied by command functions, which were subject to change on more than one occasion, among which two stand out: the command of a tank division during a war march in France in 1940, and assuming the functions of the Supreme Commander of the German units in Africa in 1941. Another crucial factor in the changes in the meaning of the war developments in 1917 was that Erwin Rommel became interesting to the public relatively quickly during the National Socialism period. The aforementioned book "Infantry Attacks" from 1937, allegedly also read by Adolf Hitler and contributing to Rommel's professional advancement, played the most important role here.<sup>366</sup>

The achievements and success of young First Lieutenant Rommel during World War I, especially on the Soča and Italian battlefields in 1917, were important in National Socialism propaganda. This extremely positive view of Rommel,

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-38.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-45.

spread by the Third Reich media, influenced the collective conscience of the Germans even after 1945. The basic conclusion of the National Socialism propaganda was that Rommel's decisive military virtues had been formed in his youth and did not change significantly later in life. But we must also take into account that Rommel's public image, formed in the 1940s, also negatively affected him. The public had high expectations of him; his failures were often presented as victories; and above all, we should not forget that there were numerous critics of Rommel in the German Armed Forces and in the top circles of the National Socialist Party. They resented his self-wilfulness, unprofessionalism, and lack of strategic thinking and experience; he allegedly neglected logistical issues and lacked persistence. Criticism directed at the Württemberg General did not affect his career at first, but it was gaining in sharpness and relevance towards the end of the war, especially after the defeat in Africa, when support for Hitler decreased.

After 1945, international historiography was under a strong impression of Rommel's personality and the new myth of the great German Field Marshal was born. The number of biographical publications and movies on Rommel was increasing, with questions revolving mostly around two content sets: Rommel's military-historical achievements, and the question of the political orientation of the "Desert Fox", above all Rommel's potential involvement in the preparations for an assassination attempt on Hitler.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

## *IN THE SHADOW OF ERWIN ROMMEL*

In the years preceding World War I, young officers who probably had no clue they were about to fight in not only one but two World Wars were finishing schooling at German military academies. Many of them died on the battlefields during the war, but many also survived, continuing their military careers after the war and being promoted to Generals and Field Marshals. Some of them also left their mark on the territory of the present-day Republic of Slovenia. Although many know that First Lieutenant and later Field Marshal Erwin Rommel participated in the Kolovrat battles, it is very rarely mentioned that there were a total of six young German officers in the composition of the German Alpine Corps on Kolovrat who later became Generals. These were Hermann Balck (1893-1982), Heinrich Kirchheim (1882-1973), Erwin Rommel (1891-1944), Ferdinand Schörner (1892-1973) and the somewhat older Theodor Sprösser (1870-1933). It would be excessive to contribute the success of the entire 14<sup>th</sup> Army mostly to Rommel, but it is nevertheless true that Rommel was the one operating in the environment, encouraging initiative and independent decision-making in line with the intent of the superior, and that German units at that time already had an updated and unified concept of operation.

On the first and the second days of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, those who particularly proved themselves in the main effort of the attack in the Tolmin-Kolovrat direction were the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian Division, the Bavarian Guards Regiment Leib, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment, in which the aforementioned officers fought. On the first day of the offensive, the Leib Regiment fought at Tolmin at the height of the attack with the stage objective of Hill 1114. It also occupied this important mountain top in the late afternoon of 24 October. The leader of the regiment was Major

Robert von Bothmer (1875-1918), who died just before the end of World War I, falling in battle on 18 September 1918.

Second Lieutenant Ferdinand Schörner, commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Company of the Leib Regiment, directly led the Hill 1114 attack on 24 October 1917 and was for this achievement decorated with the Pour le Mérite. He continued his military career after the war and achieved the rank of Field Marshal during World War II. In the final period of his military career, he was known for his brutality, earning him the nickname “Bloody Ferdinand”.

On 24 October, near Tolmin, the Württemberg Mountain Battalion attacked on the right flank of the Leib Regiment. Battalion Commander Major Theodor Sprösser and First Lieutenant Erwin Rommel stood out as the leading officers. Major Sprösser was important for the professional development of young Erwin Rommel. In his military career, he rose to the rank of Major General and wrote the history of the Württemberg mountain shooters just before his death. The book is an extraordinarily valuable document of the time and events of that period, and a quality source for researchers.

It is evident from scripts and reports that the relationship between Rommel and Sprösser was based on mutual trust. There was quite a generation gap between them, since Sprösser was a whole 20 years older than Rommel. The fact is that Sprösser was a brilliant and experienced battalion commander, who knew how to raise his officers and how to put them in appropriate command posts. He gave First Lieutenants the responsible tasks of company and detachment commanders, which in practice meant leadership of units basically at the rank of battalion. As a mentor and counsellor he prepared them for the assumption of greater responsibilities right on the battlefields. He was good at estimating their characters and putting their advantages to good use. So it is no surprise that he delegated responsible and also risky tasks in the height of the attack to the motivated First Lieutenant Rommel, not only on the Soča Front, but also on other battlefields. He knew that Rommel had enough confidence and knowledge for independent thinking and decision-making even in the most critical of conditions. Rommel respected Sprösser and followed his guidelines. In practice, they both operated on the principles of *auftragstaktik* command

and control, and understood what a disciplined initiative meant. Sprösser was the first mentor who decisively influenced Rommel's professional development. His great appreciation of Rommel is clearly seen in a sentence describing the successful attack of Rommel and his detachment on Matajur: "Incredible achievement of the commander (Rommel), brilliant, as much because of his undying dedication and audacity as his independence and skill."<sup>368</sup>

During the first phase of the Kolovrat attack on 24 October 1917, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bavarian Jäger Regiment was in the second echelon as a tactical reserve in the German Alpine Corps. At the beginning of the attack, they followed the Leib Regiment over Hlevnik. They joined the direct combat on the morning of 25 October on the left flank of the Leib Regiment east of Hill 1114. There were two young officers strengthening in this Regiment, who achieved the rank of General later in their military careers. These were Heinrich Kirchheim and Hermann Balck.

Captain Heinrich Kirchheim was the commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Jäger Battalion at Tolmin, and he proved himself greatly in the battle of 25 October 1917 east of Hill 1114 on Kolovrat, and also later in the continuation of the breakthrough towards Piava. In 1918, he was decorated with the Pour le Mérite, like Rommel. He ended his military career in the German Armed Forces in 1945 with the rank of Colonel General. During the Tolmin breakthrough, Hermann Balck was the commander of the machine gun company in the 10<sup>th</sup> Jäger Battalion.

On the morning of 25 October, he also took over command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Jäger Company, since its commander had fallen in battle. Balck deemed his immediate superior, Captain Kirchheim, to be the best commander he had during World War I. In his opinion, he was one of the best officers he ever had the chance of meeting. His tactical sixth sense was one of a kind. Officers and non-commissioned officers followed him without hesitation. In his book, Balck stresses that it was a great honour for him to serve under him.<sup>369</sup> Kirchheim encouraged freedom of operation in the spirit of mission command with his subordinate officers and non-commissioned officers. He

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<sup>368</sup> T. Sprösser: *Die Geschichte der Württembergischen Gebirgsschützen*, p. 285.

<sup>369</sup> H. Balck: *Order in Chaos*, p. 50.

knew how to develop and maintain the level of officers' professionalism, and he encouraged the development of talented individuals.<sup>370</sup>

Among the five officers, Hermann Balck deserves a special place. We can put him on an equal footing with Erwin Rommel as a competent and successful officer. They had a lot in common, although they came from very different backgrounds. Balck came from a very old military family. His father, Colonel General William Balck, was the commander of a division in World War I. Before the Great War, he had had a reputation as one of the greatest theoreticians of military tactics, and wrote many books on this topic. This fact certainly had an impact on the professional development of his son, Hermann. He began his career path in the 10<sup>th</sup> Jäger Battalion together with Heinz Wilhelm Guderian (1888-1954), the father of German armoured units and later his mentor. At that time (1907), the commander of this battalion was the father of Heinz Guderian, Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Guderian (1858-1914). Erwin Rommel, two years older than Balck, was born into a family without military tradition. Maybe that is the reason he tried even harder to prove himself.

On the other hand, Rommel and Balck had had very similar experiences and career paths as junior officers in World War I. They were both decorated with the Iron Cross 1<sup>st</sup> Class and the Iron Cross 2<sup>nd</sup> Class. Rommel was injured in combat three times, Balck six times. As Lieutenant and First Lieutenant, they were both commanders of a company and detachment; they both fought in the composition of the German Alpine Corps; and Rommel was also the commanding officer of an ad hoc battalion as Captain towards the end of the war. In December 1917, Rommel was decorated with the highest Prussian combat award, the Pour le Mérite. Balck was proposed for this decoration in October 1918, but the war ended before the decoration ceremony took place. The comparison of their careers is also interesting in a later period, in World War II, in which Rommel rose to the rank of Field Marshal and Balck to the rank of Colonel General. During World War II, Rommel was commander of one division, one corps, an army and two army groups. In total, he was combat commander for 28 months. Balck was a combat commander for 36 months in total during World War II, of two regiments, two divisions,

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

two corps, two armies and two army groups.<sup>371</sup> In World War II, they both continued their careers as officers or Generals of armoured units. But there is an essential difference in their “media” exposure and recognition. Rommel is without doubt the most famous German General of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, Hermann Balck is to this day known only to the narrow circle of connoisseurs of military science. In a foreword to “*Order in Chaos*”, it is written that his name is known only to the most serious researchers of World War II military history. American General William E. de Puy stated that Balck was the best division commander in the German Army. Physicist and philosopher Freeman Dyson thought that Balck was maybe the best land commander during World War II. Let us also add the assessment of German Major General Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin, who in his book “*Panzer Battles*” wrote: “If Erich von Manstein was the greatest German strategist in World War II, I think that Hermann Balck was the best land commander.”<sup>372</sup>

It is probably not far from the truth that Hermann Balck developed into an excellent commander because he mastered both the tactical and the operational levels. Rommel remained excellent at the tactical level during his career, but did not achieve optimum results at the operational level, according to experts. Balck was very good at taking advantage of his educated staff officers’ knowledge, whereas Rommel did not pay much attention to them or even ignored them.<sup>373</sup>

In the case of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, the role of Rommel is put to the forefront, especially in the media landscape. But as we know, he was not the only decisive factor of the Tolmin breakthrough. The offensive took place both at the operational and the tactical level. Rommel was operating at a tactical level with his detachment and within the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, but this also had an impact on the operational level. If we focus on the fighting on Kolovrat and the conquest of Matajur, Rommel stood out in a tactical sense, not so much by the conquering of Matajur as by his infiltration on 25 October on the Kolovrat Ridge. With the idea of a breakthrough in a calmer section of

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<sup>371</sup> H. Balck: *Order in Chaos*, preface XV-XVI.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, preface IX.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, preface XVI.

the front, he untangled complicated conditions with regard to Hill 1114 and thus gained a tactical advantage over the Italians, introducing tactical reserve on the Kolovrat Ridge.

The offensive success can also be attributed to officers and Generals from different units and commands. On the operational level, we can mention only General von Dellmensingen, who as the Chief of Staff of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army had a key impact and contribution to the success. We should not forget that the first condition for success was the timely and covert movement of forces to the battlefield. For this, the most important aspect was good planning at the operational level, and a coordinated implementation of force and assets movements. Von Dellmensingen of course belongs to the older generation, who ended their military careers after World War I.

It is a fact that all officers learnt the basics of manoeuvre warfare in infantry (mountain and jäger) in the early stages of their military careers, when strongly expressed freedom of operations was often outside standard frameworks. The majority of them improved their knowledge later, together with technical development, in motorized and armoured units (Balck, Rommel). It is certainly extraordinary that different young officers, who later left their indelible mark in military history, found themselves in combat on our territory at the same time.



## IS THE 12<sup>TH</sup> SOČA OFFENSIVE JUST HISTORY?

Given its characteristics, the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive took place at a strategic, operational and tactical level. In the second half of 1917, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dealing with a serious crisis in all three domains of strategic defence: political, economic and military. Since the Empire asked Germany for help, discussions were taking place at both the political and military strategic levels before the final decision on a joint offensive.

At the operational level, an important achievement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was the breakdown in cohesion and will to fight in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army, which caused the Italian Army to retreat to the Piave River. A distinct military advantage, mostly of the German Army, was at the time not enough for a total defeat of the Italian Army. In addition to a country's military capabilities, economic and political capabilities are also important for victory or defeat in a war. The military victory of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army had only a short-term strategic influence, because the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart only a year later, mainly due to national, political and economic causes which of course also profoundly impacted military capabilities.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive was a complex and demanding operation, both from a planning-organizational and from a method of execution point of view. It was definitely not an example of a classic offensive operation, known from the static front warfare of World War I. The offensive objective was to defeat the enemy, and above all to break the moral component of their combat power. It was a clash of two different concepts, two doctrinal approaches, two different cultures of unit command and control, and of course also of doctrines of offensive and defensive operations. Two important pillars which decisively

contributed to the victory of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army really stood out; the first is the already well-known German concept of command and control, *auftragstaktik*, and the other represents a still relatively unknown domain which we will call a “manoeuvrist approach”<sup>374</sup> This is an expression which was not known at the time, but we can estimate that the commanders’ way of thinking at all levels was very close to this concept, which is today being introduced into the military doctrines of modern armies.<sup>375</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive also raises the question of why the commanders of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army’s tactical units had such a decisive role in October 1917 between Bovec and Tolmin. It is known that leadership is a core combat function which also connects and directs all others. There are numerous styles of command, from totally centralized to totally decentralized. In the past, neither of these extreme poles proved to be optimal in practice. The Germans entered the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive with a partially decentralized command concept, while the Italians had an established centralized system. The partially decentralized concept was based on command with a centralized intent and decentralized execution. This allowed subordinates’ initiative, and connection between commanders of adjacent units in a horizontal line. The centralized intent guaranteed unity of effort,<sup>376</sup> directed towards the same joint objective. Maintaining the permanent initiative of the attacking units forced the enemy into a subordinate position which made taking the initiative impossible.

The Italian army operated on diametrically opposite principles. At the highest level, the intent was decentralized and the execution was centralized. A month before the beginning of the offensive, General Cadorna gave orders with the clear intent of a transition from offensive operations to defensive operations. His subordinate commander in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, General Capello, disregarded Cadorna’s order and still operated towards offensive operations. This conflict in the decisions of important commanders did not guarantee unity of effort, or consequently firm defence in the area of responsibility of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which

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<sup>374</sup> German “Manöver Strategie”.

<sup>375</sup> NATO standard AJP-3.22 Allied Joint Doctrine for Land Operations, Edition A Version 1, March 2016, NATO Standardization Office, pp. 2-1; Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 2-5.

<sup>376</sup> German “Einheit der Anstrengung”.

was the main effort of the strike of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. The core command principle is the principle of unity of command.<sup>377</sup> The opposites between Generals Cadorna and Capello are therefore not analyzed in the light of a decentralized command, but in the light of a decentralized intent and disunity of effort.

On the Italian side, centralized execution was based on a vertical structure, with commanders crucially depending on the orders from the top. One consequence of a centralized command was also the absence of initiative, and a lack of awareness of the importance of cooperation and coordination between adjacent units on the horizontal line. After the telephone lines between commands were cut at the beginning of the offensive, they were consequently waiting for orders that never came.

All the attempts of the Italian defence and the cessation of offensive were more local in nature. For example, an attempt to establish defence on the Kred-Robič line in the afternoon of 24 October was meant to protect units on Kobarid-Stol, which were in danger of losing contact with the hinterland at that time. After the first ten hours of the offensive, the withdrawal of the Italian forces from the Krn mountain range was possible only by a breakthrough, and that only over the Idrsko Bridge. The Napoleon Bridge at Kobarid had already been demolished in the afternoon of 24 October by the Italians, and the water level in the Soča was too high to allow for wading. In this way, the minimal chance of stopping the breakthrough existed only until the morning of 25 October. At that time, a sensible defence measure would have been to strengthen forces on the entire Kolovrat-Matajur-Mija Ridge. In such a short period of time, the relocation of reserve units from the sector of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army south of Cividale del Friuli was impossible. With the fall of Hlevnik and later Kolovrat, the defence of the Soča Valley between Tolmin and Kobarid was no longer possible. The fast and deep penetration of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army on the first day of the offensive was therefore not a consequence of superiority in firepower and physical force, but mostly the result of an excellent command and manoeuvre concept on the German and Austro-Hungarian side, and the absence of an efficient command in critical moments on the Italian side. In the field of manoeuvre, mobility won over the static condition.

<sup>377</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p. 63.

For this reason, the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is still an important study source, and also an example of good practice in the field of combat functions interoperability. In the phase of offensive preparations the key was good intelligence preparation, whose objective was to find the precise locations of the key capabilities of the Italian Army (command posts, signal centres, artillery positions). This was essential information for setting the priority objectives of the first artillery and gas attack, whose goal was also cutting off the telephone lines and consequently the interruption of the command system in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's units. In the absence of orders from superior commands and the lack of one's own initiative, the cohesiveness began to fall apart and the will to fight was diminishing.

Thus, the defeat of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was not a consequence of critical losses of people and material resources. Surprise and the speed of the attack caused the first confusion and then chaos on the Italian side, which the attacking units took as an opportunity. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army achieved the disintegration of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army units' combat power in a coordinated and gradual manner due to the combat functions of intelligence provision, followed by fire support and manoeuvre.

Key combat functions with measures which were important for the victory of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive:

Provision of intelligence services	Breaking of the Italian enigma Airborne reconnaissance and photography Preparation of topographic maps Direct reconnaissance of the battlefield before the initiation of the offense Tactical reconnaissance during the offensive
Fire support	Short focused artillery preparation for key targets Moveable blockade artillery fire in support of assault units Echeloning of artillery fire depending on weapon systems and calibres
Manoeuvre	Deep penetration tactics with a breakthrough and infiltration Use of squad automatic weapon and machine guns for direct support of attacking assault units
Command	Command with mission and intent, with expressed unity of effort and clearly defined goals

The attack was directed at all three components of the enemy's fighting power: conceptual, physical and moral. The conceptual part was about the conflict of two doctrines – linear and centralized on the Italian side, and non-linear and decentralized on the other side. With regard to the moral component, the key element was an attack on the cohesiveness of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army's units and their will to fight. For the physical part of fighting power, the key was tactics of deep penetrations with coordinated fire support.

In addition to physical force and resources, the knowledge and broad-mindedness of the commanding officers were important for leadership and operations in a complex environment; we will call this “manoeuvrist approach”. It should not be equated or confused with a physical manoeuvre as a combat function. A physical manoeuvre is the use of forces with movement in combination with speed and firepower.<sup>378</sup> The processes of a manoeuvrist approach take place at the level of the mind, as the expression states (use of intellectual capabilities and knowledge), with the key elements of the understanding of a military conflict and the targeting<sup>379</sup> of the conceptual and moral component of the enemy's fighting power.<sup>380</sup> Let us remember that Moltke stressed in his writings that the operation's operational objective is to break the enemy's will to fight.<sup>381</sup> The concept is based on understanding human nature and the ability to recognize human weaknesses and points of influence. Education and broad-mindedness are key qualities in a manoeuvrist approach. A manoeuvrist approach and mission command are closely connected and are to this day core doctrinal pillars of modern armed forces. A manoeuvrist approach is actually one of the key parts of the combat decision-making process, with the knowledge, experience and intellectual power of the commanding officers at all levels as decisive factors.

The military geographical area was in itself not a key factor of victory or defeat in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, but it nevertheless had an important impact on success or defeat. In the Soča Region, the terrain, in combination with the weather, was relatively difficult, and thus an important risk factor for

<sup>378</sup> B. Furlan: *Vojaška doktrina*, p. 59.

<sup>379</sup> German “Abzielen”

<sup>380</sup> Ministry of Defence: *ADP Operations*, pp. 5-20.

<sup>381</sup> M. N. Vego: *Joint Operational Warfare*, p. II-30.

the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. The varied mountain terrain with high elevation differences demanded excellent physical fitness, mostly of assault and infantry units, and specialist mountain warfare knowledge of the commanders. Of course, this does not mean the mastery of technical rope manoeuvres or climbing, but of command, movement skills, survival and warfare tactics of smaller units in the mountains.

During the phase of offensive preparation, the commanding officers were aware that the physical fitness of soldiers would be of great importance. For this reason units conducted mountain marches above the Drava Valley daily before the mission initiative, and also on Jelovica before leaving for the front line. Later this paid off significantly, since the assault units reached the extreme limits of physical capacity during the height of the attack. The increased physical stress of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units had already begun a week before the initiation of the offensive, with night marches in the rain to the front line. The assault units spent the last 30 hours before the attack outdoors or in the best case scenario in damp underground rooms and tunnels. Apart from the ever-present threat of an artillery attack, humidity and cold were the most dangerous enemies. Poor nutrition and lack of sleep only sped up hypothermia. In the first attack echelon, the units got almost no rest from 22 to 26 October, since the activities of guarding, reconnaissance and planning for the next day, and sometimes also fighting, also took place at night.

Only individual companies within regiments and battalions were able to withstand the extreme physical exertion. In the Leib Regiment, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion stood out in terms of quality and preparedness; during the most critical combats on Hlevnik and Kolovrat, its place was in the centre of the attack.

We can only imagine how the conditions would have exacerbated the situation if the German units had not succeeded in conquering Ježa and Kolovrat in the first 30 hours of the attack.

The commanding officers of the lower tactical attacking units mastered some important skills which were necessary for successful operations on mountain terrain. Firstly, this comprised understanding of all the dimensions

of mountain terrain, especially the vertical dimension and terrain diversity. Units were operating separately in individual directions, with a disciplined initiative and independent functioning of commanders at the lowest levels as conditions for success. In general, officers were well-trained in practical orientation and mastered the use of topographic maps. They understood what represented key areas in mountain terrain in a military sense and where the decisive points were. They excelled at infantry manoeuvres on diverse ground which they knew how to take advantage of for covert movements towards enemy positions almost to within the reach of hand grenades. With squad automatic weapons and machine guns, the commanders of lower tactical units (squad, platoon, company) achieved local fire superiority and appropriately protected their breakthrough forces in higher commands (division, corps) with correct echeloning of artillery support.

The rapid breakthrough of the attackers in those geographical conditions was an absolute surprise, especially for the Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. Breaking through all three defence lines at Tolmin in combat conditions off the beaten track in bad weather and conquering 900 metres of elevation difference was a manoeuvre which never happened before on the Soča Front. Poor visibility due to rain, fog and smoke after the explosions was a tactical advantage for the attacking units, since the Italian observers could not get a clear picture of the activity. Many reports of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units included mentions of how the enemy was surprised in underground rooms and tunnels and some officers even at breakfast.

From the military geographical area point of view, the most important successes of the first day of the offensive were the conquering of the following decisive points: Hill 1114, Ježa, Mrzli vrh and Kobarid. The first three peaks geographically dominated the whole Tolmin Bridgehead, and their conquest formed conditions for moving reserve units and combat and logistic support during the attack. With the conquest of Ježa and Hill 1114, the attacking units broadened the control area deep into the defence system towards Hum and forward towards Cividale del Friuli. With the breakthrough of the 12<sup>th</sup> Silesian and the 50<sup>th</sup> Division into Kobarid and forward towards the village of Kreda, they placed a wedge deep into the Italian defence and divided the battlefield

into two separate parts, unable to support each other any longer. All the Italian units in the Krn mountain range found themselves besieged, with the ring also closing on the units on Polovnik and Stol.

The key success of the second day of the attack was the conquest of the entire Kolovrat Ridge and the Livek Pass. Thus, the first important communication line for the moving of other echelons in the Tolmin-Idrsko-Livek direction and forward towards Cividale del Friuli was opened.

During the examination of surveys directly on the battlefields and archival documents and other written sources, one question constantly recurred: after 100 years, does the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive hold only historical value, and to what extent is that experience still topical today? It is a fact that no war repeats itself in the same form and in the same way. Much has changed and it is difficult to compare conditions then and today. Nevertheless, there are some domains which we can determine as learning from experience, even though a century has passed since then.

Conducting a case study on the former battlefields alongside the Soča River is therefore not necessarily only a historical visit, but also an excellent opportunity for an expert debate directly on the battlefield. With this study and more in-depth expert approaches to events of that time, the ways of thinking, combat decision-making processes, decisions, and command styles of the former commanders are surprisingly close to us even today. The added value is the geographical area, which has mostly remained unchanged, and still enables a reconstruction of the events of that time in the field. The development of manoeuvrist approach and command of modern commanders can also be built on events which happened a hundred years ago. This is still valid despite the fact that weapons systems, combat support and combat service support cannot be practically compared with that period. What is surprising after years of examination and military study is the fact that today's command system in modern armed forces is based on a system demonstrated mainly by the elite German units in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. At that time they called it *auftragstaktik*, but modern military doctrines use the term "mission command". What is interesting is the fact that this concept of command was forgotten after World War II and was revived in the

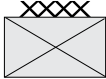
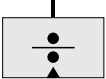





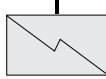
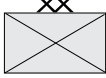
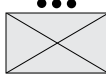

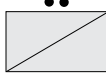
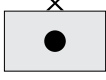
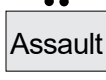

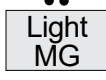

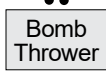

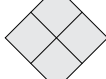
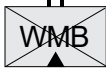
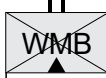
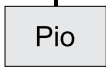


1980s and 1990s. Today, command is the most important combat function, connecting all others.

One other important fact, forgotten on the Soča battlefield right up to the present day, should also be mentioned. It was in our own territory, combined with a few other successful offensives in European battlespaces, that they quashed the myth and stereotype of World War I as a totally static war in underground rooms and tunnels. The Soča breakthrough in October 1917 absolutely bears the hallmark of manoeuvre warfare. This is a textbook example of joint warfare of infantry and artillery branches with surprisingly similar or even the same elements as modern infantry warfare. This invaluable source of experience and the whole battlefield is right here, on our doorstep.

The Upper Soča Region is therefore interesting not only for its natural beauty but also from the point of view of military history and military science. Despite the distance in time, the 12<sup>th</sup> Offensive left an indelible mark and will therefore remain an important source of study in military history and military warfare theory. The professional public, and above all the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Slovenian Armed Forces with a high degree of broad-mindedness, will certainly not be able to forget these events, even though they happened a hundred years ago.

## LEGEND OF TACTICAL SYMBOLS

14		14 <sup>th</sup> Army	226		226 <sup>th</sup> Mountain Machine Gun Company
		Stein Corps			Mortar Mortar Company
		German Alpine Corps (formation division)			Recruit Recruitment Company
33		33 <sup>rd</sup> Austro-Hungarian Infantry Division			Communications Company
117		117 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Division	HQ		HQ Infantry Squad
1		1 <sup>st</sup> Jäger Brigade			Reconnaissance Squad
7		7 <sup>th</sup> Artillery Brigade			Assault Assault Squad
1		1 <sup>st</sup> Jäger Regiment			Light Machine Gun Squad
R2		2 <sup>nd</sup> Reserve Jäger Battalion			Grenade Launcher Squad
		Bavarian Lifeguards Regiment Leib			Italian units
		Württemberg Mountain Battalion			Württemberg Mountain Battalion - HQ
3		3 <sup>rd</sup> Pioneer Company	5		of the 5 <sup>th</sup> Battalion

## ABSTRACT

This monograph attempts to delineate the military significance of the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive, which was a complex and demanding military operation both from the planning and organizational point of view and from the execution style perspective. The first few chapters describe a military analysis of the geographical space of the Upper Soča Valley, in addition to an analysis of the military and political conditions in Europe in 1917. The preparations for the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive; the structure and movement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army units to the Soča battlefield; the situation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Italian Army; the fighting power of the German Army; the German style of leadership, command and control, *auftragstaktik*; mountain warfare; and the development of a breakthrough tactic are described in detail, including comprehensive descriptions of the combat activities of the warring parties, especially in the early days of the battle, when the offensive was taking place on Slovenian soil. Another addition is a detailed analysis of the reasons for the German-Austro-Hungarian victory and the Italian defeat, and new findings on the role of Erwin Rommel and some of the other German officers in the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive. The monograph also addresses the issue of some of the created myths about the great German army leader, and in the end underlines why the 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is so important for the development of military science.

It became a clash of two different concepts, two doctrinal approaches, two different cultures of unit leadership, command and control, and also, of course, of doctrines of offensive and defensive operations. Two important pillars which decisively contributed to the victory of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army really stood out. The first is the already well-known German concept of leadership, command and control, *auftragstaktik*, that today's military doctrines deal with as mission command or intent command, while the other represents a

relatively unknown domain which we name “manoeuvrist approach”. It is true that this expression was not known at the time, but we can estimate that the commanders’ way of thinking at all levels was very close to this concept which is today being introduced into modern armies’ military doctrines.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Soča Offensive is today defined as manoeuvre warfare. The tactic which was used was that of assault groups which developed into the breakthrough tactic or infiltration tactic. “The Miracle of Caporetto” is therefore a textbook example of joint warfare of infantry and artillery branches, with surprisingly similar or even the same elements as modern infantry warfare.

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**Assistant Professor, Blaž Torkar PhD**, a research fellow, was born in 1981 in Šempeter pri Novi Gorici, earned his Bachelor of Political Science of Defence Studies, and is a Professor of History. He received the Prešeren Award for Students by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana for his Bachelor Thesis “Rekrutacija in urjenje slovenskih pripadnikov misij britanske Uprave za posebne operacije” (Recruitment and Training of the Slovene Members of the British Special Operations Executive Missions). In 2010, he earned his doctorate at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Primorska with the doctoral thesis “Ozadja delovanja ameriške obveščevalne službe OSS v Sloveniji (1943-1945)” (*The Background of American OSS Operations in Slovenia (1943–1945)*). He has conducted research in American, British, Italian, German and Serbian archives. He is the author of the scientific monographies “Mission Yugoslavia” “Hidden Resistance” and numerous other scientific and expert publications from the field of modern military history. As a scholarship holder of the Ministry of Defence, he took a post in the Slovenian Armed Forces in 2005. Since May 2006, he has worked for the Military Schools Centre in the Military Museum of the Slovenian Armed Forces and in the Department of Military Science as a lecturer of Military History.



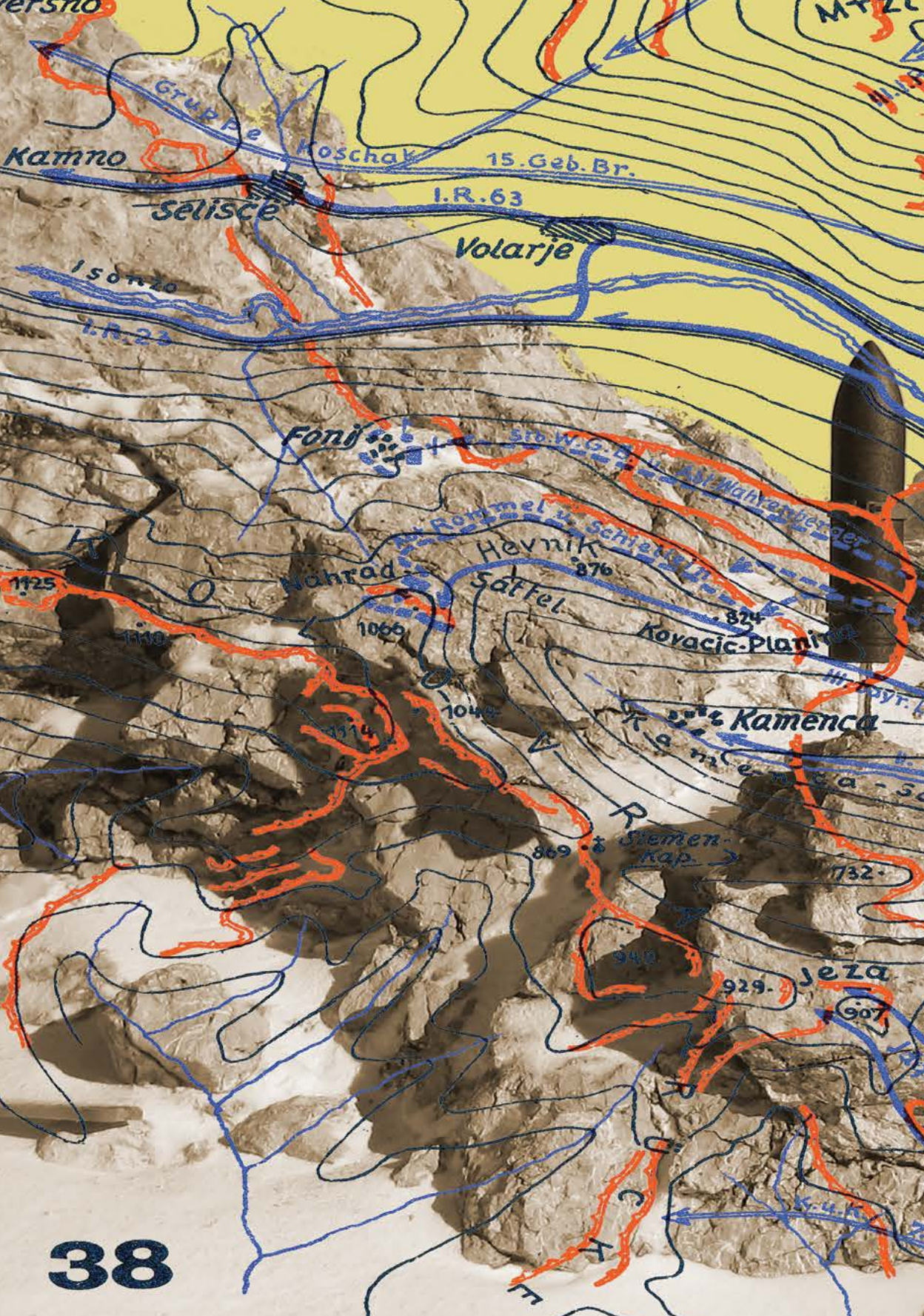


**Lieutenant Colonel Miha Kuhar**, born in 1960 in Ljubljana, a Slovenian Armed Forces officer, has been active in various mountain-related domains from an early age. He took up mountain climbing seriously in 1978. He has been an active mountain rescuer-instructor for over 20 years; since 2005, he has also earned an international professional qualification as a mountain guide (International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations – IFMGA). In 1992, he took a post in the Slovenian Armed Forces, where he successfully refined his mountain experience as an officer. For more than 25 years he has carried

out various tactical duties in mountain units and the Mountain School of the Slovenian Armed Forces. He has dedicated the major part of his military career to the development of military mountaineering and mountain warfare as a writer of training programmes and holder of mountain warfare courses. He successfully completed higher staff training in the Slovenian Armed Forces, and has completed mountain warfare courses in Austria and Germany, among others. In Norway he earned the title of winter combat instructor. In 2006, he was the leader of a successful alpine expedition of the Slovenian Armed Forces to Alaska. He spent more than three years in peacekeeping operations and missions in Afghanistan (2009, 2011) and Kosovo (2012, 2013, 2017). He disseminates his vast experience and knowledge as a lecturer, instructor, publicist and screenwriter of mountain educational films. As an enthusiast of military and mountain history, he has also studied military events in the area of the Soča Front since 1993.







Kamno

Gruppe  
Selisce

Koschak

15. Geb. Br.

I.R. 63

Volarje

1500

I.R. 23

Fonj

570 W.G.

Rommel u. Schlarf

1125

Nahrada

Hevnik

876

Sattel

1069

Kovacic-Planina

824

1040

Kamenca

869

Siemen-Kap.

1132

940

929

Jeza

907