The Campaign in the Trentino.

By EDGAR FOA.

(Read before the Alpine Club, May 1, 1917.)
(Abbreviated Report.)

HALF a century has now passed in Italy since the Seven Weeks' War. During that time the work of unification has never been regarded as complete, because a portion of essentially Italian soil is still unredeemed. During that time, too, strange things have happened; and perhaps not the least the entry of Italy into the Triple Alliance, to which she remained pledged for more than thirty years. It was brought about by two principal causes—the one temporary, and the other (so far) permanent. The former was the jealousy of France as a Mediterranean power. The latter was the great dread of invasion from the N.—that is to say, from the Trentino—which I will refer to presently.

In order to understand the character of the campaign in the Trentino, it is absolutely necessary to keep in mind two important circumstances: first, the nature of the terrain, so entirely different from that on which men have hitherto been accustomed to wage war; and secondly, the fact that, from the Italian point of view, the Alpine frontier imposed upon them after the war of 1866 might fairly be characterised as absolutely 'wicked.'

With regard to the first point—in a country which has been well described as 'so torn and twisted, so channelled by river valleys and sinuous passes, so crumpled into layer upon layer of folded hills, so overlooked and dominated by that colossal background of the Alpine ranges, which thrust their vast black shoulders and their heads of splintered rock and gleaming snow over all the lesser heights before them'—it is impossible to expect the rules of ordinary warfare to prevail.

So much for the Trentino itself. But as you move eastwards along the Alpine chain, when you begin to reach the districts of Carnia and Cadore, Nature seems to relax a little in the severity of her moods, and you are no longer face to face with the same awe-inspiring scenes of ruggedness and grandeur—

Digitized by Google

or at least not to the same extent. The Alps of Carinthia form a barrier to the invader, out of all proportion less formidable than that which confronts him in the Trentino.

Accordingly, it was (I believe) the opinion of good judges—amply confirmed, as you will see, by events—that the policy of the Italian command, stated in general terms, would be: '*Hold in the north, drive to the east.*' But in order to be able to maintain the defensive in the north with any prospect of success, an offensive on a scale of at least some magnitude was of the greatest importance.

I do not know whether, when the present frontier in the Trentino was defined after the war of 1866, the grave perils to which it left them exposed were thoroughly appreciated by the Italians. But it seems difficult to believe that they can altogether have escaped their observation.

It was not only that you had the great Alpine rampart, with Austria at the top and Italy at the bottom; it was not only that the fertile plains and thriving cities of Lombardy and Venetia lay at the absolute mercy of the invader from the N., but every strategical position, every dominating pass, from the Swiss frontier to the Gulf of Trieste (a distance, I suppose, of not less than three hundred miles), was retained by the Austrians. Moreover, during the fifty years that have passed since Venetia was restored to Italy, every means had been taken by the Austrians to increase the strength of their positions. The forts have been increased in number and power; camps of huge extent have been established; and every device that ingenuity and resource could suggest has been utilised. When the war came, the necessary materials—roads, guns, forts, trenches—were all at hand. Only the necessary men (at that moment engaged on other fronts) were wanting. In the three weeks' respite given to them, in circumstances to which I will refer in a moment, they brought to the Alps every available man.

For the past fifty years this great fear of invasion from the N. (in repetition of the inroads of the barbarians of early days) has lain as a weight on all Italian hearts. It helps us to understand why Italy permitted herself to be thrust into that unnatural Teutonic alliance which lasted for so many years. It serves to explain why, for many months after the beginning of the war, she maintained a neutrality which she disliked, because she was insufficiently armed. And it enables us to appreciate why, when she declared war against Austria, she was unwilling, for many months more, to add to the number

Digitized by Google

of her enemies by a declaration of war against Germany also. That this great dread was not unfounded, the present campaign (in spite of all the precautions which were taken by carrying the war at once into the enemy's country) has, as you will hear presently, amply proved. But the circumstance that the attention of the enemies of Italy is sufficiently engaged elsewhere has, fortunately, so far prevented it from being to any extent realised.

In 1866, however, the Italians were not in a position to raise further objection. They had to take what they could get. Their campaign in that war had not, as we have seen, been altogether a success. Both Prussia, their ally, and the French Emperor, their friend—I think he may not unjustly be looked upon as one of the 'candid' order—refused to move a finger to help them. Although they had acquired by the war the great province of Venetia, it had not in fact been conquered, but had been conferred on them as a gift; and what is conferred as a gift you must, under the authority of a familiar proverb, take with all its faults. Moreover, they had become accustomed to the process of building up the nation in the only way in which it could be built up—piece by piece, as the occasion offered; and they accepted what fell to them from the knees of the gods, leaving the future more or less to take care of itself.

When the war broke out, there was but one way with regard to the Trentino in which it was possible for the Italians to act. The Austrian positions must be 'rushed.' There must be something in the nature of a surprise attack. Fortunately the bulk of the hostile forces were occupied elsewhere, on the Galician and Serbian fronts. Moreover, there seems no doubt that the Austrian command made the not uncommon mistake of under-estimating the strength of their adversary.

But there can be little question that the Italian military authorities were terribly handicapped by the unfortunate political events which occurred in Rome after the official denunciation of the Triple Alliance on May 3, 1915—events which delayed the beginning of hostilities for a fortnight or three weeks, an interval which would have been of the utmost value in starting the Trentino campaign.

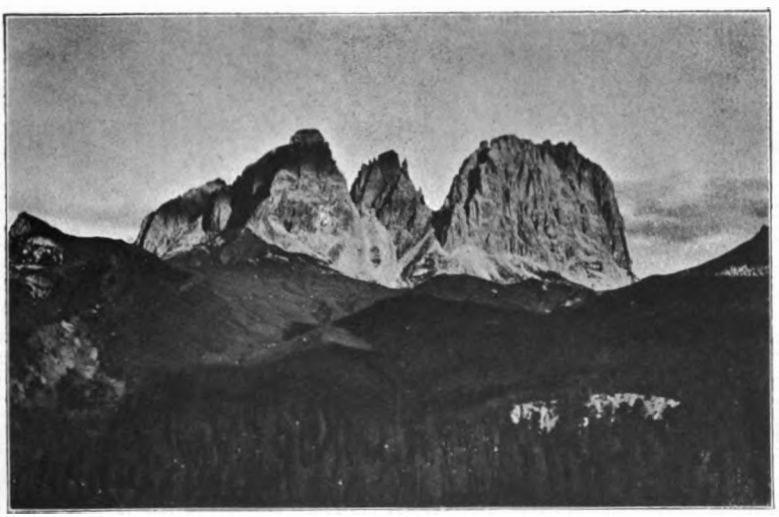
The first thing obviously to be done was to block the main roads and principal passes. The chief road of the region is naturally the one running N. and S. down the valley of the Adige. But almost equally important are those in the Val Sugana, with its 'feeder' from the Dolomites through Primiero,

Digitized by Google



R. S. Morrish, photo.

CRODA DA LAGO.
From the Falzarego Pass.



R. S. Morrish, photo.

LANGKOFEL.
Group from the Pordoi Pass.

Digitized by Google

and the road through Cortina connecting the Drave valley with the Carnia district and the remainder of the province of Venetia. There is also an important road in the Vallarsa. On the W. you have the two great massifs of the Ortler to the N., and the Adamello to the S., with the respective passes, the Stelvio and the Tonale, each crossed by a great road. Finally, to the extreme S. of the region (in the neighbourhood of Riva) you have to the W. the road through the Giudicaria valley, and, on the other side of Lake Garda, communications by passes over the somewhat lower (although still formidable) mountain groups known as Monte Baldo and Monte Pasubio, on either side of the Adige valley.

The order for the mobilisation of the Italian Army was issued on May 22, and within three or four days both the last-mentioned mountain groups were in its possession. Little or no resistance was offered to their seizure. The advance continued at once: the town of Ala, just a few miles N. of the frontier in the Adige valley, was captured, and a push made towards Rovereto, most of the heights near that town being occupied by the Italian troops. At the same time it became seriously threatened by an advance in the Vallarsa, though this advance did not enable them to capture Rovereto itself, upon the fortifications of which the Austrians had bestowed great preparation; nor have the succeeding events of the campaign yet accomplished that end. Beyond question, however, the acts of the Italians in the neighbourhood of the Adige valley in the opening days of the campaign may be said to have brought about a great change in the situation, by freeing them from the immediate danger of an irruption into the plains.

The advance in the mountain ranges round the Adige valley was backed up by another through the Val Giudicaria to the W. of Lake Garda—ground which had been trodden by some of Garibaldi's troops half a century before. No great progress in the direction of Riva, however, was apparently attempted, owing partly to the physical obstacles which presented themselves, and partly to the strength of the enemy's defences there encountered; but the gateway into Italy was blocked, and with this result, as it would appear, the military authorities had to remain satisfied.

At the same time steps were taken to close the gateways of the Stelvio and Tonale passes. A good deal of fighting, more or less of the desultory order, took place in their neighbourhood, much of it conducted on the high mountains and

Digitized by Google

glaciers themselves, in a manner which, as has been frequently pointed out, was unknown before the present war; and in the result the main object may, I think, be said to have been achieved.

An advance was made in considerable force up the Val Sugana, as by the Garibaldians fifty years before; but within about twenty or thirty miles of Trent difficulties, due both to Nature and to man, were encountered of the same kind as near Riva, and the advance appears to have stopped. Detachments of troops, however, sent northwards through the Val Cismone, seized Primiero and San Martino, and even captured Cortina, without serious opposition; though at a later stage there was a good deal of mountain fighting round the Rolle pass, as well as near Cortina.

To judge rightly of the situation, one has to keep constantly in mind that a really vital wound could hardly be inflicted on Austria in the Trentino. The fighting has been more in the nature of isolated attacks than of concerted movements on a large scale. The supreme command has clearly shrunk from the huge sacrifice of men which would have been necessary (say) for a direct attack on Trent, or even for an attempt on the enemy's railway system in the N. One must never lose sight of what I may call the key of the whole position: that the Italian attack in this region had little or no object than to keep the gates of Italy closed.

But though there are no big strategic movements to record, it is, I think, impossible to refuse our admiration to the manner in which the campaign, having regard to the almost superhuman difficulties encountered, has been carried on.

Passing now to the campaign of last year, it may be said, in general terms, that the Italians succeeded in retaining the positions in the Trentino which the taking of the initiative had enabled them to acquire. But of a general advance, of any real progress, there was no sign. In the view of the campaign which commends itself to me, it seems probable that the Italian command remained content with what had been accomplished in the opening year of the war.

The opportunity of testing the correctness of this opinion soon came. In the Trentino campaign of last year, the outstanding feature was the massed attack, in the months of May and June, by the Austrians, who succeeded in penetrating as far as the plateau which lies immediately S. of the Trentino border.

The Austrian offensive had a twofold purpose. It was

Digitized by Google

hoped, by a single crushing blow, to end the whole prospect of victory cherished by the Italians, and also to relieve the pressure beginning to make itself felt in the more easterly theatre. Moreover, the desire to revenge what the Austrians chose to consider the treacherous defection of an ally supplied a further strong incentive to the movement.

The Austrian general staff were of opinion then that the expedition would not take long to achieve its objects, and that they could spare a sufficient number of men from the Russian front, and return them there afterwards, without running too great a risk.

Accordingly, in the early part of the year, huge numbers of troops were brought from the other fronts, and by the middle of May it would appear that a force not far short of half a million men was massed upon the frontier in the Trentino. The attack may be said to have been concentrated between the Adige and the Val Sugana. It was one less in the nature of an enveloping movement, than a drive at the very centre of the opposing armies.

Possessed of the double advantage of great superiority of munitions and of position, the Austrians eventually reached the high plateau on Italian territory known as the Sette Comuni, close to Asiago. They were indeed on the very edge of the plains. The situation for the Italians began to look very critical, and betokened the probability that the invaders might after all make good their dash on the Italian lines of communication, and even seize Bassano, Vicenza, and Verona.

The retirement of the Italians, however, was very gradual. They fought during a whole month what might be described as a rearguard action on a vast scale. The fighting was especially severe at the Buole pass, where the splendid resistance saved Monte Pasubio, and therewith the Italian lines to the S. of that mountain. General Cadorna, the Italian commander-in-chief, in view of the highly critical conditions, took over the command of the Trentino armies; and under his directions a fresh army of reserve was organised and equipped in an incredibly short space of time.

About the beginning of June, however, the effort of the enemy began to show signs of exhausting itself; though the immediate causes of the change in the aspect of affairs are still perhaps a little obscure. The Italian counter-offensive was put into operation. 'At last,' as the Italian official account puts it, 'broken by thirty days' uninterrupted toilsome effort, exhausted by the enormous losses he had suffered, discouraged

Digitized by Google

by the obstinacy and spirit of our defence, the enemy was obliged to abandon the plan which he had so long meditated and prepared, and on the success of which he had counted with insolent confidence.'

The prolonged series of fights which took place on the Venetian plateau have been compared with the battle of the Marne, because they stayed the rush of massed enemy battalions on vital centres. The enemy's offensive was changed to the defensive. The coup so long and carefully planned had failed; and the Austrians found themselves under the immediate necessity of withdrawing a large part of their army —it is known to have amounted to at least half the number of their divisions—to the Russian front. The Italian command determined to do their utmost to prevent this; and by an unresting and relentless pursuit caused the enemy in his turn to undergo the experience of fighting a long-drawn rear-guard action. The chief anxiety of the Austrians was to save their artillery, and in this to a considerable extent they were successful. But it was only at the price of a large sacrifice of men that they eventually reached the line of fortified positions, where they were practically immune from further attack.

For the rest, there is not much to tell. The season during which alone serious operations are possible was on the wane; and this last winter has proved one of the longest and severest on record, both in the Alps and elsewhere. Many attacks were made by the Austrians, in the Adige valley, with the object of recovering some of their positions; but they were not on the whole crowned with success. During the autumn months the Italian strategic objective—as we are informed by the official documents—was, as before, to persist in a certain pressure on the Trentino front, in order to be able to extend the area of occupation to the E.

There is just one point of special interest to us, of which I should like to make mention. One of the principal sources of danger to the troops during the winter was the occurrence of large avalanches, no fewer than 105 of them having been officially reported on a single day. We are informed that the observations of the Meteorological Office attached to the Italian general staff led to the discovery of a direct relation between these occurrences and a special isobaric condition of Western and Mediterranean Europe; and that it thus became possible to organise a special service of urgent telegraphic warnings to the troops—a service which contributed greatly to diminish

Digitized by Google

the terrible danger to which they were exposed. And I feel sure that you will be pleased to learn that the contribution to this result of the Italian Alpine Club was officially recognised by the Supreme Command.

Nor, whilst I am on this point, can I forgo the pleasure of quoting once more an eloquent passage from the official record. 'History,' it says, 'speaks with admiration of the achievements of small armies, mere handfuls of men, which crossed the Alps during the winter. But there is no example in the past of a powerful army, nearly a whole nation in arms, encamped in the midst of winter in the Alpine zone—from the solitudes of the Adamello to the icy summits of the Dolomites, from the snowy rocks of Monte Nero to the dreary Carso swept by the N. wind. The task of creating satisfactory conditions of life among such difficulties, especially if one considers the complicated mechanism of a great army, was a very hard one. But all these difficulties were overcome by a power of organisation at least not inferior to that of any other country.'

The Records of Attempts on and Ascents of Monte Rosa from the Zermatt Side, from 1847 to 1860.

Compiled from the travellers' books of the Hôtel Monte Rosa at Zermatt and of the Riffelhaus.

By HENRY F. MONTAGNIER.

THE honour of making the first attack on Monte Rosa from the Zermatt side fell to two French travellers—M. Victor Puiseux, the well-known astronomer who long afterwards became Vice-President of the French Alpine Club, and Dr. Edouard Ordinaire, who had already achieved the distinction of being the first climber to make two ascents of Mont Blanc (see 'A.J.' xxx. 130–131). Starting from their bivouac at 'Ob dem See' (Ob See, 2992 metres on the Siegfried map) on August 12, 1847, they succeeded, apparently without much difficulty, in ascending as far as the Silbersattel (4490 metres, and only 148 metres below the summit of the highest peak), beyond which they found it impossible to proceed. The attainment of so great an altitude on a first attempt over unexplored glaciers was a remarkable feat, and it is greatly to be regretted that these two distinguished pioneers did not

Digitized by Google