

HOW THE WAR LOOKS NOW

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ITALY occupies the centre of the stage, and the stage seems to be growing wider day by day. The suddenness of her offensive shows careful preparation and it has been rewarded by signal victory. Her troops are now within eight miles of Trieste, which must therefore be within range of the Italian artillery, and also of the heavy British batteries whose appearance on the scene is a proof of the co-ordination that has been for so long a military ideal and that seems now to be something of a fact. At the moment of writing there is a pause in the advance upon Trieste, but it is due to the necessity of guarding the Italian flanks and not to a reverse.

Practically there have been no reverses with the exception of that slight ebb and flow that is a feature of every great battle. The Austrians were taken by surprise and they gave way, which seems to confirm a very general conviction that the Austrians cannot win anywhere or at any time unless they have the support and backing of German troops, and just at the moment the German troops are very fully engaged elsewhere.

The Italian campaign has been an interesting and a difficult one from the beginning. The obvious objective of the Italian armies was eastward across the Isonzo and into the enemy's country toward Trieste. But it was necessary to guard against an attack from the Trentino which, if successful, would bring an Austrian army to the rear of the Italian forces moving eastward. A glance at the map will show Italy's peculiar vulnerability from this important quarter.

A definite offensive against the Trentino was out of the question, because of the impregnable nature of the defences, and the almost impassable mountains that had been strewn thickly with fortifications of the most formidable kind. The Austrian forces could not be driven out of the Trentino, but they could be held there, and prevented from coming southward into Italy, which would at once have been fatal to the Isonzo advance eastward. An Italian army was therefore sent northward in the direction of Trent to bar the way against an Austrian invasion, and until this had been satisfactorily done the major operations to the east had to be held in abeyance. About a year ago the Austrians actually made this attempt in the hope of effecting a decisive threat against the Isonzo armies. The attempt failed, but it served at least to delay the Isonzo operations, and when the Italians were once more ready to move forward the weather had become unfavourable, and the offensive against Trieste was postponed until conditions should become more propitious.

It was the imminent necessity of checking the Italian advance eastward that led to the recent reports of a great Teuton offensive against Italy by way of the Trentino. It was the only effective way in which that advance could be stopped. If it had succeeded, if the threat had even become a substantial one, it would have meant another delay to the Italian armies on the Isonzo. It is certain that enormous preparations were made for a Teuton invasion of Italy by way of Lombardy, and it is said that a million men were massed for that purpose somewhere to the north of Trent. But the plan was abandoned, presumably because Germany had to concentrate her men on the western front to withstand the British and French, whose offensive was becoming formidable. Italian aviators reported the withdrawal of large bodies of men, and the danger to Italy passed away. The Trentino front was vital to Austria for offensive purposes, but its importance to Italy was a defensive one, and to prevent invasion.

ON the other hand, the Isonzo front was vital to Italy for offensive purposes, but to Austria for her defensive. It is now clear that Italy feels at ease with regard to her Trentino front, or she would not have attempted her present movement toward Trieste. But the Italian victory will not be complete until Trieste shall have fallen, and this would doubtless already have happened but for Italy's need to protect her flanks. It is for this reason that we hear of a sudden transfer of the fighting to the east

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of Gorizia. Nothing would have pleased the Austrians better than to see an impetuous advance on Trieste in disregard of the Austrian forces that lie to the eastward. Doubtless they hoped that the Italians would do this very thing, tempted by the glittering prize that seemed to be so close. But General Cadorna knew better than to fall into that trap, and to leave his long line on the Adriatic exposed to a flank attack from the east. He has momentarily stopped his advance upon Trieste in order to drive back his enemies who would otherwise have descended upon his line from somewhere beyond Gorizia.

THE Italian success has an importance far beyond its immediate military bearing. It comes at the moment of Austria's deepest dejection. It is hardly possible to conceal from her people the magnitude of the reverse that has befallen their arms. It is admitted by the official bulletins, and the mere naming of the towns involved tells its own tale of disaster. If Austria were free to consider her own position in the light of facts she would ask for a separate peace without the delay of a single day. She must know that every fresh reverse, with its consequent weakening of her military power, brings nearer the day that must already be clearly visible to her, when her virtual absorption by Germany will become a certainty. She must know that she is wasting in a hopeless struggle what little strength still remains to her, strength that she might better employ in preserving her own independence against an allied power that may not be wholly unwilling to see her slow depletion, and so to leave her powerless before the German domination that will surely be disclosed at the end of the war and that not even a Teuton defeat could obviate.

On the western front there has been no single movement of great importance during the week. The French won a brilliant little victory just east of Rheims by forestalling an intended attack from the neighbourhood of Moronvilliers. They forced the Germans out of carefully prepared positions, deepened the salient that the Germans had intended to crush, and captured a considerable number of prisoners. While without any immediate bearing upon the greater issues of this field it will be observed that Rheims is so close to the junction point of the Hindenburg line that any success here must have its effect in loosening the joint between the old and the new fortifications. The French action will tend, moreover, to protect Rheims against the wanton and useless bombardments to which it has been subjected from the German lines. It is against the two junction points of the old lines and the new, that is to say, against Laon in the south and Cambrai in the north, that the Allied attacks are being brought. These may be said to be the keys of the whole western war. It would probably be correct to say that if either Cambrai or Laon shall presently be taken it will mean the abandonment of the whole Hindenburg line, and not only of the Hindenburg

line, but of all German lines now on French soil. These are the two points to watch, and it is not likely that there will be any vital events elsewhere in France until the issue here has been decided.

THAT there has been no great battle during the past week around Lens or toward Cambrai must not be taken as an indication of exhaustion or quiescence. The great work of attrition goes steadily forward, and it becomes constantly more important as the German reserves from Russia and elsewhere are brought up to the battle line. The brief bulletins announcing the capture of a few yards of trench or a few shell craters with the assurances that "all counter attacks were repulsed" appear so frequently that the incurious eye passes lightly over them without a recognition of their importance. But actually they represent a military plan of vital significance, the unfolding of a method that the Germans have reason to dread even more than the large scale offensive. The trench section or shell crater that has been seized has been carefully chosen, first because of its relative vulnerability, and therefore the economy of lives with which it can be taken, and secondly, because it can be quickly consolidated against the counter attacks that the movement was intended to provoke. It is these counter attacks that represent the deadly process of attrition. They imply successive waves of German assault that break down before the concentrated Allied fire, and that are driven back over a carpet of dead and wounded. The ground gained may seem to be insignificant, but the tremendous efforts to regain it are by no means insignificant. Indeed, it may be said that the object of the attack is not to gain ground, but to provoke the counter attack. The attack, if the area has been well chosen by aeroplane observation, costs little, but the counter attack is expensive, and especially if it be repeated again and again, as is usually the case. The Allied commanders are acting on their knowledge that the Germans can not now afford to lose any ground, no matter how small its extent. It is not a matter of pushing the German lines back toward Belgium, but rather of pushing them back toward that critical point, now immediately in their rear, which, if lost, means the loss of everything, and a general retreat. The capture of a few shell craters may seem trivial enough when we compare the distance gained with the mileage to the Belgian frontier, but it is not trivial if the efforts to recapture those shell craters have cost thousands of German lives.

BUT the Belgian frontier is not the objective. The objective lies immediately behind the present German lines. It is the "last ditch" beyond which there can be no more defence. Its precise position can be surmised only in a general way. Indeed, it may have a certain elasticity, but it is represented by that point where a continued contact between the old lines and the new becomes impossible. It is now so close that a few yards gained or lost becomes of vital importance. The Germans are therefore under a dire compulsion to contest every step. They can not acquiesce in the loss of anything. They are impelled by their own necessities to bring these incessant counter attacks that must be carried out under the most destructive fire, and that deplete their forces quite as effectively as a large scale battle. It is to be remembered that the attack always loses much more severely than the defence. If the British, by a single assault carefully chosen with a view to economy, can provoke a dozen counter attacks they are obviously the gainers, and this seems to be precisely the plan that they are following. Even by the most conservative estimate the Germans are losing at the rate of ten thousand men a day, or three hundred thousand men a month. We do not know the British losses, but they are authoritatively said to be very much less. But even if they are as great, the relative advantage would still be on the side of the British, and largely so, seeing that they can better afford the expenditure.