CHAPTER 8

Italian Artillery during the First World War: Its Structural, Organic, Tactical and Material Evolution

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Introduction

At the outbreak of hostilities, the artillery of the Italian Army was in poor shape, particularly as far as the quantity of ordnance and the availability of ammunition were concerned. In the course of the World War, this was to improve considerably by dint of remarkable organizational efforts, great losses of materiel, and clever improvisation. It was not until the summer of 1918, after three years of hard work, experimentation and experience, that a force emerged that was both well organized and reasonably well equipped. The phases of this evolution run parallel to those of the other arms, and can be reduced to three basic stages: the commencement of field operations in May 1915, the eve of the Battle of Caporetto in October and November 1917, and the final battle of Vittorio Veneto in October and November 1918.

The Situation in May 1915

The whole Italian artillery suffered from the same problems as the infantry and the engineering branches. Manpower was abundant, but there was a shortage of weapons, particularly of heavy calibers, and ammunition. Just as the infantry battalions had numerically very strong companies but were short of machineguns and other specialist equipment (hand grenades, rifle grenade launchers, wire cutters, and the like), so also the artillery was too small in relation to the size of the army and its tactical requirements. There were few regiments, and while the batteries were well supplied with men and animals, artillery pieces (particularly siege weapons) were in short supply and of low quality.

The artillery consisted of the same specialist branches as in peacetime, namely: field artillery, horse artillery, mountain and pack artillery, heavy field artillery, and fortress artillery (which included coastal defense and siege...
artillery.)\(^1\) Of all these specialties, the field artillery was in the best shape. It was organized into regiments, each of three groups (gruppi). Each group (gruppo), in turn, consisted of two or three batteries, giving each regiment a total of eight batteries. One regiment was assigned to each army corps, and one to each infantry division. However, the assignments provided under the peacetime establishment plan were not achieved under operational conditions. There were not enough batteries in each regiment nor enough regiments to cover the full extent of the front. From the outset of operations it was necessary to detach groups from regiments, or indeed whole regiments from corps, and to assign them to reinforce other corps with major offensive roles. There were 49 field artillery regiments, with a total of 371 batteries. Each field battery consisted of 3 officers and 160 other ranks, 162 horses or mules (32 mounts, 118 draft animals, and 6 in reserve), 4 artillery pieces, 12 caissons, a tractor and an artillery observer vehicle. The materiel used was the Model 906 (Krupp) 75\(^{mm}\) field gun (238 batteries) and the Model 911 (Deport) 75\(^{mm}\) field gun (125 batteries), the latter differing from the former in having a split trail, a greater horizontal sector of fire, and a sliding breechblock. Each battery was furnished with 129 rounds, plus limbers and caissons per artillery piece. The eight remaining batteries were armed with an older 75\(^{mm}\) field gun, the 75A. Whereas the two newer field guns were provided with on-carriage recoil mechanisms, the 75A had to be repositioned each time that it fired.\(^2\)

The horse artillery consisted of a single regiment of 4 groups (8 batteries in total), with each group assigned to one of the four cavalry divisions. There were no significant changes to this during campaigning, either in the organization of the units or their equipment. Horse artillery was generally used in single groups, and sometimes independently of the cavalry, including in an anti-aircraft role or to reinforce other light artillery units, particularly when the cavalry could not be deployed. A battery of horse artillery consisted of: 3 officers, 169 other ranks, 225 horses or mules, of which 120 were draught animals, four 75\(^{mm}\) Krupp mod. 912 artillery pieces with light-weight carriages, 13 caissons, a flat-bed cart, and four baggage carts.

In May 1915, the heavy field artillery was armed entirely with the Krupp. 149\(^{mm}\) (149 A) heavy field howitzer, an animal-drawn weapon with an on-carriage recoil system. The small number of batteries available (28, organized into 12 groups) did not allow easy assignment to particular formations. These groups,

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