

# THE BATTLE OF SOLFERINO

11 July 1859

The Emperor of the French has named his new victory. The village of Solferino is to be identified with the tremendous battle of the 24<sup>th</sup> of June. The action is not one of unmitigated triumph to the conquerors, nor of utter defeat to the vanquished. It resembles rather Wagram than Austerlitz. It is, as usual where Austrian troops fight and Austrian Generals command, just an inclination of the balance in favour of the enemy. It is an example of stubborn discipline contending at once against an enterprising and intelligent enemy, and against the evils of a divided command. While the Zouaves were being borne back by the Austrians in position at Buffalora, and Napoleon himself was engaged in an unequal contest, four Austrian Generals were quarrelling as to the manner in which supports should be sent up, and quarrelled till the victory was torn from them. Let us apply the lesson as the facts march forward before our eyes, changing as they go the rank and precedence of nations.

The recent battle has been properly named. The Austrians write of it as the battle of the Mincio, but this is incorrect. The conflict took place on the narrow district which is bounded by the course of the Chiese on the West and by that of the Mincio on the East. All the places mentioned in the telegrams will be found about midway between these two rivers. Great as was the force assembled, and enormous as was the amount of ground covered, the battle did not reach down to the neighborhood of Mantha, nor extend Southwards beyond half the distance between that fortress and Peschlora. The tide of the battle did not roll parallel with the course of either river. In this campaign, which is fought in a network of waters, great rivers do not appear to play their usual important part: they are passed and repassed, they are bridged and forded, they are fortified and abandoned, but they are never seriously defended. The Tieino and the Sesia submitted to the passage of the invader, and even the Po was crossed and recrossed several times with impunity. When in their turn the French and Sardinians wished to pass the Tieino, the *tete-de-pont* at Buffalora was discovered to be untenable, and the invaders of Lombardy marched over almost as unresisted as the invaders of Piedmont.

After the battle of Magenta the Lambro was not an obstacle, the Adda was reached only to find broken bridges and dismantled fortresses, but no such enemy had defended the bridge of Lodi. The Serio and the Mella were passed by both hosts, and the Chiese, which had been so often and so fiercely defended, was swarmed over by the Zouaves as though it had been a river of France. This is a novelty in tactics. Perhaps it has been discovered that the old masters of the art of war were wrong, and that the passage of great rivers is not an operation during which an enemy may be taken at advantage. Perhaps this is the new principle of those "strategic considerations" which have been developed with such marvellous results in this campaign. However this may be, it certainly is not the battle of the Mincio or the battle of the Chiese which was fought on Friday last, and the Emperor of the French has full title to name the victory after the centre of the Austrian position, and, if it shall so please him, to create his new Marshal Duke of Solferino.

It is singular that we are indebted to the vanquished for all our reliable information as to the circumstances of this great battle. Not only is the Austrian bulletin the most candid acknowledgment of a defeat ever given to the world, but it is also the most satisfactory history of a defeat ever put into the same number of words. By the light of these seventeen lines of print and a tolerable map, one can almost see the situation of the combatants and the great features of the engagement.

The ground upon which this battle was fought differs from the spongy plain through which the Austrians had been so long retreating, and the French had been so long advancing. The southern end of the Lago di Garda consists of hills and broken uplands, always considered favorable to defensive operations. When the Austrian Emperor changed his tactics so suddenly that the command to recross the Minelo appeared rather the result of a deliberate judgment. It was into these uplands that the Emperor led his army.

The village of Pozzolengo, which he described as having been occupied by his right wing, is about six miles to the southwest of Peschiera. Solferino, which played so important a part in the battle, is a little village about six miles to the southwest of Pozzolengo, and is situated at the foot of the uplands, and just at the point where they descend into the plain. Away to the left across the plain, another six miles distant, is that Castel Goffredo, which we are told was occupied by the Austrian left wing. Here we have the line of battle. The three places are nearly equidistant, and form a straight front, in a southwesterly direction, from the Garda Lake. Moreover, the line is as nearly as possible of the length which the French Emperor mentioned in his message to the Empress. Its right extends over the highlands from Pozzolengo to Solferino. Its left passes along the plain from Solferino to Castel Goffredo, Solferino is the

centre and the key of the position. Behind these three points lies a second line of posts marked in the despatch, and important in the events of the day.

Guidezzolo and Cavriana are the villages that afford this second line of stations; and Volta, also mentioned in the telegram, is a town about four miles in the rear of that second line of posts, and within a very short distance of the western bank of the Mincio. We have thus the Austrian order of battle and distribution of force perfectly indicated. What the French positions may have been we can only conjecture. They probably formed a line which would have Castiglione for its centre. As the Austrians say that their left wing advanced beyond Castel Goffredo and nearly reached the banks of the Chieso, it is probable that the allied force was principally concentrated in the higher district which approaches the shores of the Garda Lake. The Austrian line seems to have advanced in a crescent form, pushing forward its wings from Pozzolengo and Castel Goffredo with great energy and some success, and attempting to force forward their centre along the slopes of the uplands towards Castiglione. Here, however, they were met and defeated; Solferino, "heroically defended," was at last carried by the French troops.

The Austrians had extended their line too far even for their immense force. Having thus lost the key to their whole position, the Austrian centre must have been forced back to the village of Cavriana, four miles in the rear. They must again have been dislodged by the pursuing French and Sardinians, and again must have retreated upon Volta, six miles still farther in the rear. Volta is, we believe, an open town, and the Austrian centre, which now occupied it, was ten miles in rear of the position it had held in the morning. The French were following up their success, and were preparing for an attack upon Volta with their main body. If this should succeed, the Austrian army must be cut in two and entirely routed. The Austrian Emperor therefore called on his wings, now so greatly in advance of his centre, and drew off his entire army; not, however, retreating very far, but, as it would appear, retiring only to the bank of the Mincio, which, after Volta had become his central position, was close in his rear. Next day he crossed the river and we have now the significant announcement that General Hess takes the command, and that important business requires the presence of the Emperor of Austria in Vienna.

The most wonderful part of this battle—and indeed the most wonderful characteristic of the whole campaign—is that the Austrians when beaten were allowed to evacuate the field of battle without pursuit. Whether this is moderation or policy or necessity on the part of the French Emperor we cannot yet tell. Nor can we tell whether he looks upon this Austrian army as a sportsman looks upon the game in his preserves, and manages them with a design of getting as many battles out of them as possible or whether it has always been a chance—happily decided in his favor—whether he should drive back those obstinate Austrians, or fall himself in the effort. Napoleon III. keeps his own counsel too closely to let Europe know this interesting truth. It appears certain, however, that when the Austrians were content to retreat, the contemplated attack upon Volta was suspended, and the advance of the French ceased. Was it the bridge of gold to the flying enemy, or was it the accord of peace to the beaten and yet abiding fore?

We cannot quite comprehend the restraint of the French upon this and other occasions, except upon the supposition that they had good reason for avoiding any further conflict at that particular moment. But, whatever may be the determining cause of those tactics, it certainly is not the want of any personal enterprise on the part of the French Emperor which has allowed the Austrian army to remain unbroken after this defeat. He has shown himself to be as personally brave as one of his own Grenadiers, and we must not cavil at the steps of progress which are so leisurely but apparently so surely mounted. We should rather look forward with interest for tokens of that moderation in victory which, after all, must test the ultimate prosperity of even this most prosperous of men.