

Historical context

1795 Campaign in Italy

From 1792 to 1795, France had been at war with most of Europe. In the meantime, Napoleon was drawing up a personal plan for a future Italian campaign.

The border of Piedmont was then controlled by a small number of volunteer battalions which boasted the name of *Armée d'Italie*, under the command of the hero of Valmy, general François Christophe Kellermann. In autumn, a new *Armée d'Italie* was organized, with reinforcements recalled from Spain, and put under general Barthélemy Schérer, while Kellermann received the command of the weaker *Armée des Alpes*. From 1794 till 1795, however, a brilliant military "star" would rise among the French troops: general André Masséna, a name which will be a basic stone during the early Napoleonic Wars.

André Masséna was born in Nice, then part of the Kingdom of Sardinia, the son of a shopkeeper Jules Masséna (Giulio Massena) and wife Marguerite Fabre, married on August 1, 1754. His father's family was Christian and the original family name was Menasse. His father died in 1764 and, after his mother remarried, he was sent to live with relatives.

The young Masséna reached the rank of Colonel in 1792 and personally organized his own volunteers battalion, deployed along the border to Piedmont.

Masséna continued training his battalion and prepared it for battle, hoping that it would be incorporated into the regular army. A month after the occupation of Nice, in October 1792, the battalion was one of four volunteer battalions that became part of the French *Armée d'Italie*.

Masséna distinguished himself in that occasion and was quickly promoted, attaining the rank of general of brigade in August 1793, followed by general of division the following December. He was prominent in all the campaigns on the Italian Riviera over the next two years, participating in the attack on Saorgio (1794) and finally becoming the "hero of Loano".



The war before the battle of Loano

The little Piedmont was defended by the so-called Corps of the South (general Colli and 9.000 Piedmontese), gradually strengthened by part of the 30.000 Austrians present in Northern Italy (under FML De Vins and Wallis), and by Auxiliary Corps (general Argenteau with 9.000 men, formed in 7 battalions and 2 squadrons; general Provera division with 5 battalions), all paid by the kingdom of Sardinia after the Treaty of Valenzana.

The French general Philbert Sérurier with 6.000 men and Masséna with 20.000 men opened (again) the hostilities during the hot 1795 summer, mainly against

the state of Genoa (Liguria and Riviera).

The Austrians tried in vain to force the French outposts in the Val Quiliano (June 23-27), while then French counterattacked over the whole front between the creek Bormida of Millesimo and the Vermanagna valley. General Colli seized mount Spinarda, Argenteau took the fork of Settepani forcing Masséna to withdraw the right wing (June 27). By the half of July the Austro-Sardinians attacks ended in a natural truce by exhaustion.

In the meanwhile, the French army in Spain advanced, seizing the Catalonia while taking Bilbao and Vitoria and marching toward Castile. By July 10, Spain decided to ask for a separate peace, recognizing the revolutionary government and ceding the territory of Santo Domingo, but returning to the prewar borders in Europe. This left the armies on the Pyrenees free to march east and reinforce the armies on the Alps, enabling the combined army to overrun Piedmont.



In September 1795, General of Division Schérer replaced François Kellermann in command of the Army of Italy. Facing the French still were around 30.000 Austrians and 12.000 Piedmontese under the overall command of Feldzeugmeister Joseph Nikolaus De Vins and the "ad interim commander" Benedetto, Duke of Chablais. Relations between the Austrians and the Piedmontese remained touchy, even though the latter force was led by an Austrian officer, Feldmarschal-Leutnant Michelangelo Colli. The politicians in Paris insisted that Schérer mount an offensive.

On October 26, 1795, with the help of Barras, Napoleon was named Commander in Chief of the Army of Italy.

Bad weather and a true "Italian" hurricane forced the French to abandon the most elevated positions in early November and Schérer withdrew his troops from the high Val Tanaro toward Liguria and sea. The gouty, old De Vins interpreted this movement as the beginning of the French winter cantonment and passed overall command onto FML Wallis, on November 21st.

Instead of going to winter cantonments, the French passed to the attack (Nov 23): in the left wing, Sérurier, over the high Tanaro stream basin to the crests toward St. Bernard pass, only to be bloodily rejected; in the centre, Masséna pushed back the Austrian Argenteau to Bernardino. The serious losses suffered and the shortage of ammunition forced Argenteau to retreat during the night to the hill of Giovetti, leaving the Austrian right wing in Liguria unprotected, while the Piedmontese remained in the Val Tanaro. Masséna immediately caught the occasion and advanced up to Melogno hill, where he left a detachment; he also sent a column to St. Giacomo and with a thousand of men continued his march toward Finale (hours 24:00).

The 12 battalions between Mt. Ravinet and the Castellaro had fought for the whole day and were rejected from Castellaro to Loano. The Austrians were forced to withdraw on Savona. Wallis continued along the Sansobbia valley to Acqui, abandoning his artillery. Sérurier pressed the retreating troops of Colli sending

columns through Mallare toward Carcare and Montezemolo, threatening Colli and Argenteau with a surrounding maneuver, which therefore forced them to withdraw on the line St. Giovanni-Montezemolo. The night of the 30th they were utterly forced to retreat until Ceva, menaced by another surrounding attempt from south. However, Sérurier didn't pursue the enemies and limited himself to maintain the possession of the mountains passes.

The two sides agreed to an armistice at Loano, also valid for the Rhine frontier, causing the formalization of the Alliance among England, Austria, Russia and Piedmont (Nov. 1795), the young Sardinian nation of Vittorio Amedeo III, that owned, along the sea coast, the Principalities of Nice (occupied by the French army in 1792) and Oneglia, with their respective "hinterland", as well as Loano (seized in 1794).

The French "Winterstellung"

And it was "in this scenery" that Borghetto, the walled village on the sea, suddenly came to be the first line. The Municipio (Palazzo Pubblico) or Mayor's palace was then under requisition by the Armée d'Italie to accommodate the overall command. At Borghetto, generals Scherer, Masséna and Augereau met together to decide the future strategies of the battle.

From Borghetto, along forty kilometers north-westwards, began the new front, subsequently called in all history books the "line of Borghetto" or "Line of Saint Spirit" (Santo Spirito). The front line went from the sea till Garessio through hills, plateaus and crest, with a complete set of field fortifications (trenches, fleches, redoubts). Against it, at Borghetto, the Austrians had fortified the three low hills in front of the Varatella creek, the higher of which was the Castellaro.

Finally, it was from the Borghetto hills that, at dawn of November, 23rd 1795, were launched two rockets to signal the start of the battle to the gunboats, anchored during the night at a short distance from the beach, whose guns opened against the Austrian positions between Borghetto and Pietra.

In the spring of 1994, someone found a booklet, while rearranging the town library, a notebook with a solid cover in red-brick cardboard with a title written on an octagonal label with golden edges: "1793 - 24 Aprile.

Libro o sia memoria della guerra delli Francesi con l'impero" (1793 - 24th April. Book or memory of the war of the French against the Empire). It probably was the work of a shopkeeper running his business in the old house on what currently is called Cavour Street.

All the tension and the difficulties born out of that unexpected state of war resurfaced from the aged yellow pages of the notebook upon which, two centuries ago, notes copied from an autograph manuscript belonging to the Sea-captain Clemente Bertolussi di Giuseppe had been transcribed.

"Donque è avvenuta la battaglia delli sanculotti francesi, il giorno 23 novembre al mattino, il Lunedì. Si è perso fino di dire la messa per le Anime

Sante del Purgatorio; è durata tutto il giorno fino alle ore 24 di notte; sempre foco vivo, fucili e cannonate che sembrava un giudizio universale e sembrava un terremoto. E potete pensare voi quanta paura se siamo visti e queste son cose da non credere"...

Strength and positions

The French Army of Italy enjoyed the more agreeable temperature of the coast, and, it was ready to end the campaign delivering a big battle, which the general Scherer hoped to make decisive.

The right wing of the French army was under general Augereau, consisting of two French divisions just arrived from the Pyrenees. Deployed from the crests of Borghetto to the mountains fronting those of Pianetta and San Bernardo.

The centre of the French army was under general Masséna. It was formed by two divisions of the former French Army of Italy occupying the positions of Zuccarello and Castel Vecchio. Finally, the left wing of the French army was under general Sérurier. This corps consisted of the third French division also coming from the army of Pyrenees.

Counting all reinforcements it had just received, the Armée d'Italie was endowed with a weak force of around 40,000 fighters. Besides, the French soldiers missed bread, clothings and ammunitions. The communications between the French army and Genoa were interrupted by the British fleet, absolute master of the sea since after the fight at the Iles d'Hyères.

The Austro-Sardinian army was around 55,000 men strong. This, in spite of the losses that diseases had caused. Further, the army was abundantly supplied with food and all kind of supplies. The position occupied by the Austro-Sardinian was parallel to the French line, the armies only separated by a narrow and deep valley.

Around the village of Loano, Austro-Sardinians had established a strong defensive position on three low hills raised enough to dominate all the neighbourhood.

Moreover, the position of Loano consisted of invincible posts, connected by entrenchments, and defended by many Austrian guns of various calibre.

The first contingent of the Austrian army was under the Austrian general Wallis and formed the left wing of the Austro-Sardinian army. This corps extended to Loano



and occupied the coastal posts of Pietra and Finale. Finale was, probably, where the Austro-Sardinian commander had established his headquarters. The centre of the army was under the command of the Austrian general Argenteau and consisted of the second Austrian mixed contingent. This body was spread out, from peak to peak, from the outposts of Campo di Prati and Rocca Barbena up till the mountains of Melogno and Settepani. Finally, the Sardinian contingent formed the right wing of the army, under command of Sardinian general Colli. The corps was spread between the strongholds of Ceva, Coni and Mondovì.

The French soldiers, devoid of bread, shoes, and deprived enthusiastically looked forward to the fight, hoping to pillage newly conquered lands.

Masséna in command

Arriving in a country which was utterly strange to him, general Schérer was rather modest to disbelieve himself. Gathering his generals, who had already fought, successfully, in the mountains of Italy, Schérer offered, generously, to the most deserving of all the direction of the attack planning. After a common deliberation, the French generals chose to entrust the attack preparation to general Masséna. Indeed, he was considered the most skilful. Immediately, he ordered the general recognition of all the advanced positions of the enemy lines.

On November 17th, at the head of a strong French column, general Charlet deployed in front of the lines of Campo dei Prati. Far from expecting this visit, the Austrians were battered and their trenches destroyed. After this success, Charlet did not find any more obstacles. So, having overwhelmed all enemy outposts until Rocca Barbena and Toirano, he returned to the French camp with three Austrian guns and 500 prisoners.

Camp gossips told the frivolous Austrian general Argenteau, more courtier than warrior, had allowed most of his officers to take leave and enjoy themselves in Turin. Aware of the manifest inferiority of the French army and of such an advanced season, Argenteau had thought the French would not dare to look for a decisive battle.

On the other hand, general Wallis, who replaced general De Vins, ill, did not believe useful to deploy the Austro-Sardinian army for battle. Moreover, the new Austrian commander in chief gave the necessary orders to deploy his army to winter quarters.

The French plan

The attack plan, arranged by Masséna and Schérer, bore not happily. This plan consisted in a turning maneuver against the right wing of Austro-Sardinian army, placing it between two fire lines. Regrettably, an abundant snowfall blocked, abruptly, the operations for a few days, causing the impracticability of all the mountains paths. Hence, the French plan seemed to become impossible to realize.

After few days, the sky cleared up and snows began to

melt. However, Schérer and Masséna had already conceived an alternate attack plan.

By this new arrangement, the two French generals again wished to surround an enemy wing. However, this time, the operation would not be against the right wing but directly against the centre of the Austro-Sardinians.

Masséna, who proposed this fearless plan, himself was in charge to execute it. To execute the main action of the new attack, he ordered the retreat and new deployment to his troops, those which he had sent to the left wing of the French army for the execution of the previous attack. But let us go back to the Masséna battleplan. The French planned three attacks, a fake one and two real thrust. General Sérurier, at the head of the French left wing, was charged to harass the Piedmontese camps, posted at San Bernardo and Pianetta. Above and beyond, through a false attack, Sérurier had to prevent the Piedmontese from supporting the centre of their army. This last corps indirectly supporting Masséna's main effort.

November 22nd, incoming dusk

On November 22nd, at nightfall, Masséna left Castel Vecchio. He was at the head of the French centre.

To be able to surround the opposite Austrian centre, Masséna intended to realize two simultaneous attacks against the enemies. The first would take place on the right of the enemy centre, whereas a second attack would take place on the left of the same corps of the Austro-Sardinian army. With this double advancing movement, Masséna wished to reach the positions of Melogno and Mt. Settepani, cutting off any possibility of retreat of the Austro-Sardinian centre.

Among the adversities which the French soldiers bore, one of the most painful was the lack of shoes. So deprived, the French soldiers were obliged to walk through snow, ice, on the harshness of rocks and in roads scattered with cutting pebbles. To mitigate these physical torments, certain French soldiers wrapped their feet with linen, bandages, strips pulled from the skin bags, etc.

As the French infantry divisions were informed of the movements to battle, an unexpected event brought a wholesome influence on the troops: having escaped the English blockade cruises, some French ships brought 100.000 rations of biscuit and 24.000 pairs of shoes.

Such news brought great rejoice to French camps. The rations were quickly distributed, the weak and the suffering being served those who first, then those who had accomplished some remarkable deed

Regrettably, the rations were insufficient to supply the whole army, so lots of French soldiers kept their bare feet and lack of food.

“Qu'importe, dit un vieux grenadier Français, nous n'en manquerons pas demain, l'ennemi sera chargé de la fourniture.”

November 23rd, the dawn

General Masséna made a short speech to his troops: the general told that the way to victory was in their bayonets. Soon, the attack against the centre of the Austro-Sardinians began. Placed under the command of generals LaHarpe and Charlet, a French column attacked the Austrian troops deployed on the peak of the rocky Rocca Barbena. After a hard fight, the French broke the



Austrian front on all points.

At the same time, Masséna seized the positions of Malsabecco (Alzabecchi) and Banco (Sebanco). Subsequently, he pursued, until Bardineto, the enemy who had gathered on that plateau.

On the other hand, in the location of Bardineto, the Austrians offered a desperate resistance and stopped, for a long time, the French efforts. Getting annoyed for the length of this fight, Masséna called, to support him, the reserve of the French army. The fight renewed with a new fury.

Giving example to the French soldiers, the courageous Charlet ran forward, heading the assault, and was struck by a mortal shot. His death caused the rage of the older French soldiers. Having formed a long row, the French hurled themselves, in compact masses, on the enemy trenches. After a sharp fight, the Austrians were shattered in a close combat brawl and put in complete flight.

The Austrians routed towards the positions of Bagnasco, on the left bank of Bormida. In vain general Argenteau tried to rally them.

Augereau moves forward

While the centre of the Austro-Sardinian army was engaged, Augereau assaulted, successfully, the left wing, toward Loano and the heights occupied by the Argenteau's troops.

Nine French gunboats were concentrated between Borghetto and Pietra, armed with large calibre guns. Two rockets shot from the Santo Spirito redoubt gave the signal to start the bombardment. As soon as these gunboats began to fire, the Austrians, deployed near the sea, were taken between two fire: the guns of the redoubts and those at sea. The French split the assaulting troops in four columns which had to advance one behind the other. The column was closed by the Reserve brigade of Dommartin. The target was to flank the fortified Austrian line toward Toirano and seize part of the enemy front line.

Facing the French Santo Spirito line, there were three terrain mamelons, the higher, being the more distant from the coast, called "Gran Castellaro".

The sudden frontal attack was led by brigadier Rusca, at the head of 1700 French soldiers, who attacked those three low and round hills, defending the surrounding areas of Loano. The first two were easily and promptly taken by the French. The third, the "Grand Castellaro", was strongly defended by 1200 Austrians of the general Rukavina. The defenders there opposed resistance and repulsed the assault of the French chasseurs (light infantry).

Being afraid to lose too much precious time, Augereau left his right wing under the command of the Reserve brigadier Dommartin, with orders to contain the enemy in front of Loano. Augereau then ordered general Perrin (called Victor) to invest the hill which still resisted. Finally, Augereau also ordered general Banel, commanding the left brigade, to seize the village of Toirano and to advance, together with the troops of Rusca, to the heights above Loano, where was the Monte Carmelo abbey. This attack was conducted vigorously.

Part of the Austrian troops which defended Toirano retreated towards the Abbey. The rest retreated to Monte

Carmelo.

Banel, shot and wounded during the attack of the village, asked for a replacement and left his command to the battalion commander Lannes "the brave". Stimulated by the example of Lannes, the French climbed, at "*pas de charge*", the slopes, where the right of the Austrians of general Wallis linked with the central corps. With much bravery, the French captured, in sequence, four Austrian batteries which were nevertheless solidly entrenched. Immediately, the guns were turned back against the Austrians.



The struggle was very hard at Toirano, Dari and near its abbey, the Certosa, where troops of the Austrian GM Terney defended the terrain together with the retreating Grenzer of colonel Vukassovich; meter after meter they were pushed back towards Boissano and then dispersed.

The final events

Glory for general Rukavina

"Judging had come the moment of the surrender of the Castellaro line, Augereau ordered general Rukavina to lay down arms. This one, aware of the defeat, agreed to leave the hill, which he occupied, provided the French would let him withdraw his baggage on the Mt. Carmelo."

The request of the Austrian general Roccavina was denied.

Then, Rukavina offered to abandon his artillery, but insisting on having the freedom to withdraw. Augereau also rejected this offer unsympathetically and gave him ten minutes to surrender without conditions. "Ten minutes?" answered Rukavina, "I shall not need so much time in order to pass there." While declaring this, Rukavina indicated with his finger the French brigade of general Victor.

This unit was deployed between the positions of Castellaro and Monte Carmelo. Some believed, such a phrase to be bombastic, however, Rukavina had made his decision. The general was determined to succumb, at least, with glory if he had to be undone.

That is why, suddenly, Rukavina came out of his trenches with his soldiers, jumping furiously at the 117th and 118th demi-brigades, repulsed them, and, in spite of the violent fire from Victor's brigade, succeeded in orderly retreating. It was a big surprise for the French. The vigor and the generous resolution of general Rukavina caused

great admiration among French soldiers. Actually, that retreat was facilitated by the supporting Austrian cavalry (Uhlans) of general Wallis.

The Toirano's Certosa surrenders

To obtain the complete defeat of the Austro-Sardinian centre, the last target was old Toirano's abbey (the Certosa). It was placed in a gorge, at the side of Mont Toirano. Several Austrian batteries were installed there bombarding the French troops with dreadful fire.

The Certosa contained not less than 800 Austrians but they did not imitate the glorious example just given them by Rukavina. In fact, while still observing the preparations of the final French assault against the Certosa, the soldiers capitulated without fighting.

Shameful for the defeat of their centre, the Austrians had gathered on Monte Carmelo. It was the last attempt to avoid the French victory.

Breakthrough and pursuit

Guessing the projects of the Austrians, Schérer resolved to prevent the enemy from gaining the initiative. Hence, taking himself directly the command of the French right wing, he advanced against the new positions that the Austro-Sardinian centre now occupied.

Meanwhile, having seized Monte Carmo, major Suchet descended the heights of the same mountain and maneuvered in order to fall on the back of the right extremity of the Austrian left wing.

However Schérer remained uncertain of what had taken place in the centre and began to hesitate.

In the case Masséna could not move deep enough on the back of Austro-Sardinian lines, Schérer was afraid of compromising the obliging the Austrians to a too quick retreat and disengagement. Soon, a message from Masséna eased his doubts.

Indeed, Masséna wrote Schérer that his two divisions had won against the Austrians of general Argenteau and Masséna's troops already threatened the Apennines heights and that he had ordered to move in such way to place his troops between the Piedmontese and their allies.

In order to assist the Masséna's operations of, Schérer strengthened Suchet's brigade with three more battalions.

After having received such reinforcements, Suchet was charged of surrounding the right side of the Austrian left wing. However, suddenly, a wet, wicked fog, accompanied with swirls of snow and frozen rain, obscured the daylight and ended the French pursuit against the centre and the left wing of the Austro-Sardinian army.

The Austrians took advantage of the bad weather to withdraw to Finale, on the coast. During their retreat they abandoned tents, artillery and caissons. The next day, at daybreak, Augereau again began the pursuit of the Austrian army, this time with his light troops.

While Augereau had reached the Austrian rearguard, Masséna saw the increasing danger of an enemy's retreat. Having concluded the crushing defeat of the Austrian centre by taking the important position of San Pietro del Monte, Masséna had broken and widely opened the Austrian left wing. After foreseeing that the

Austrians of the left wing would retreat through the trails of San Giacomo, Masséna order to his two divisions a long forced march, in spite of the storm and the bad weather.

Meanwhile, Masséna occupied the heights of San Giacomo with four French battalions under the orders of general Joubert. Until that moment, everything had happened as Masséna had foreseen. The Austrians, pressed from behind, on their front and on the flanks, scattered to run away, far from the coast and along mountains paths.

From 24th to 27th November, as result of successes gained by the French against the Austro-Sardinians, Sérurier too advanced, seizing the Val Tanaro, Intrappa, Garessio and the heights of the Spinarda. This series of successes allowed the French to seize the totality of the Piedmontese artillery.

Evaluation of the battle

This battle was also famous because it lasted five days. Registered losses were somehow exaggerated. It was said Austro-Sardinians lost on the battlefield 4000 dead, 5000 prisoners and almost all of their artillery. This victory gave the French all the supplies which Austrians had collected in their depots: Finale, Vado, Loano, Savone, etc.



Austrian sources gave the following numbers (excluding Piedmontese units).

Losses of the Lombardischen Armée and of the k.k. Hilfstruppenkorps (at the end of the retreat):
 dead 8 officers and 833 men (NCO and privates)
 wounded 31 officers and 757 men.
 missing 73 officers and 3822 men.
 Total 112 officers and 5412 men.
 General Terney (Ternay) and colonels Brabeck and Vukassovich were taken prisoners and the true number of Austrians prisoners was 25 officers and 450 men, some coming from the general Colli's corps. 48 guns were captured with 27 more abandoned along the coast. It was confirmed the loss of very large quantities of baggage, ammunition and supplies.
 The French reported 500 dead and 800 wounded soldiers (Schérer Relation).
 After the battle, finally, the French army of Italy went to its winter quarters.
 This French victory restored the communications lines with the Genoese coast and opened the doors to the Italic peninsula .
 Probably Schérer command decisions were on a par with the best of Bonaparte, coming good second if compared with the brilliant 1796 campaign. Schérer acted well and the victory at Loano can be placed among the most shining of the armies of France. However, actually, we should attribute the merit of the success where it lies: the courage of the French revolutionary soldiers and the skill of the newborn military star: André Masséna.



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The six volumes by Virgilio Ilari, Piero Paoletti, and Piero Crociani under review here comprise three-quarters of the official military history of the Italian peninsula from the mid-eighteenth century through the French Revolution. The first volume was *La Guerra delle Alpi* [The war in the Alps] (1792-1796). Their series is a significant contribution to the historical literature of the period. The authors rely heavily on archival material from Milan, Rome, Turin, and Naples, along with an exhaustive and impressive bibliography of printed sources. In all three volumes, the authors' narrative begins with an analysis of Italy's geopolitical position in Europe, and the impact of European politics and military campaigns on the individual Italian states.

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