

# Castel Cerino 1809: Battle Events and Strategic Survey in Zanoli's Memoirs – Part I.

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## Introduction

A surfeit of cultural vitality substantiates the present dissertation in the field of humanistic sciences; the pre-conceived theme of research mostly focuses on a largely overlooked military campaign and modern historical events<sup>1</sup>.

Profitable synergies of cultural elaboration which converge into the actual study are consequently rooted in commemoration of quite outstanding feats of arms, the 1809 Italian campaign fought in western *Venetiae* against the Imperial army of the Habsburgs.

The pre-determined aims and final formation of the seminal investigation have been sharpened, and refined in their perspective: to offer a creditably formative and in-depth historical examination and clarification of stringent, contextualized events of battle that occurred in the *Vallata del Tramigna* (Tramigna Valley)<sup>2</sup>, in late April 1809.

The research best captures a penetrating documentary knowledge of the above indicated geo-strategic resolutions compiled by a contemporary Italian author named Alessandro Zanoli<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The topic has been laboriously pre-defined and pre-ordered; it is referred to a remarkable primary first-hand memorial account. With objective evidence, the text can be pertinently inserted in the XIXth century Napoleonic historiography.

<sup>2</sup> In Northern Italy. County of Verona. Descending from Mount Tenda, where the ancient castle of Illasi is located, one enters the *valle Tramigna*. Once reached Cazzano di Tramigna, in the center of the village there is the source of the Tramigna stream, from which the valley takes name. Locale description: Castel Cerino, This site is located around five kilometres to the North of Soave. For a comprehensive, exhaustive study and accurate features of geographical evaluation, dedicated researchers can profitably consult an online website utility: [www.googlemaps.it](http://www.googlemaps.it), insert the word Castelcerino, and click.

<sup>3</sup> In the year 1809, Zanoli (Concordia, 21 September 1779 - Sesto San Giovanni, 21 November 1855) performed his tasks as *commissario di guerra* (war commissioner) by the *Stato-maggiore* (General-Staff) of the *Guardia reale* (Italian Royal Guard). The matter makes the point, that he carried out his capabilities as *sottoispettore alle rassegne* (under-inspector to the inspections). He received the titled distinction of *Barone* (Baron). The *relazione* (relation) is extrapolated from the 1845 edited version. An enthralling narrative. It proves to be one of the most comprehensive and factual accounts of the arms of the Italian army of the *Regno Italico*; and most importantly, the 1809 Italian campaign. The text is written with clarity of style. A dry sense of respectability emerges about the incredibly brutal battle exploits, and, in an analogous manner, the behind-the-scenes military responsibilities.

A factual pre-comprehension is necessary: in the vividly recalled concurrence of the reported facts, was the combination of Zanoli's personal experience what formed the literary chore of his *narrato reminiscenziale* (narrative matter)?

Zanoli was accustomed to an exemplary gentleman's style; a firm disciplinarian, an enterprising and wary governmental office holder whose fearlessness, allegiance, and forbearance, seemed to have been almost unsullied.

Beyond any proved documentary, he was a trustworthy and confident eye-witness.

In thoroughly relating his experiences, the Italian historiographer systematized detailed information that he had personally known (even if we are not aware as to whether he participated in those actions of war), or he gathered actual eye-witness accounts of the combats.

The methodical narrative profiled presents just enough contextual material either to clarify both the contemporary strategy analysts as well as the discerning scholars alike to understand the overall picture, and it includes memorable accounts of arduous fighting under inflexible conditions of military confrontation.

The literary importance of the writings, because of its faithful portrayal of historic reality, is unequivocally attested; however, the primary origin of the relation appears to mitigate the harsh development of the facts.

What is brought to life is a peculiar *aperçu de guerre*<sup>4</sup>, as well as the overwhelming hardships and untold "pushes of glory" that soldiers have lived through as combatants in the Italic Kingdom's army in Northern Italy (War of the Fifth Coalition, 10 April - 14 October 1809).

Stories and soldiers' experiences throughout intense adversity in conflict that were almost consigned to oblivion, if not literally unknown is their outstanding value.

Insightfulness and a flowing treatise on the nature of combat as it was experienced by ordinary combatants in the forefront of action, as it transpired all along the front offers a vivid mental picture to military campaigns discerning scholars.

More significant, Zanoli was critical of some wartime aspects rendered "sacred stereotype" by the Empire syndrome; in particular, the unprincipled concept of ostentatious military glory<sup>5</sup>, a magniloquent and flamboyant symbolic definition of great suffering, bloodshed, and death.

We recognize that the author did not embrace the elusive *raison d'être*<sup>6</sup> which mortally affected the aggressive campaigns of conquest and annexation under the Empire.

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<sup>4</sup> *Id est*, a detailed outline, a discerning perception, an insight of warfare.

<sup>5</sup> That was a formidable infatuation.

<sup>6</sup> *I.e.*, reason for being.

A man of his time and beyond purely patriotic zealous fervour, Zanoli's historical account is a fine "travelogue" of the early nineteenth-century *Regno italico* (Italic Kingdom), at war, as described by a stout-hearted participant.

Whatever his true motivations were, this relevant coeval author left behind to his contemporaries as well as to posterity, and to a larger audience than he anticipated, a true, vibrant and critical record of the commitment of troops under controversial circumstances, without so much jingoistic panache.

### **Strategic Cadre**

The military events which occurred on April 30, 1809<sup>7</sup>, are complex and difficult to understand as reported documentary facts.

In his compelling account, a meaningful read in its own right, the memorialist Alessandro Zanoli, recounts, in an historical excursion, a detailed, lucid and a most significant outline of that bloody day of contest.

A well-thought-out practical analysis of that crucial and consuming war emergence is offered by the author, who ennobles the styled formalities of his writing by providing a greater understanding for the reasons why simply declared tactical objectives were so critical to achieve the battle action's objective in the *Valle del Tramigna*.

Irrefutably, Zanoli actually got the most out of the real history of what happened.

However, one question can be raised regarding the conducted investigation: was Zanoli prone to comprehensive research, did he equally rely on the recollections of combat veterans as source material?

He reported that the Austrians had invested General Bonfanti<sup>8</sup> with superior forces in the hamlet of Castel Cerino<sup>9</sup> (district of Soave).

And that the First Infantry regiment of the Line of the army of the Italic Kingdom tenaciously repulsed the enemy attack, pursuing the assaulters back to Montefoscarino.

Quickly developing actions ensued, and quite a number of prisoners were taken by the fiercely determined advancing Italian force.

### **Castel Cerino: Territorial Defense and Battle Actions**

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<sup>7</sup> The historic reference is contextualized and particularly considered: the Italian war front, the Northern territories of the *Venetiae*.

<sup>8</sup> A native of Milano. 1768 – 1851. Appointed *Generale di divisione* (division General) in 1813.

<sup>9</sup> A centuries old location. In the Middle Ages, the village was cited with the nominal reference of *Castrum Ecerini*. Because of its mild climate and isolation, the site was a privileged retreat for a couple of monastic settlements.

“Il 30 l’inimico investe con forze superiori Bonfanti a Castel Cerino, e il I.° d’infanteria ribatte l’attacco incalzando gli aggressori sino a Montefoscarino facendo loro parecchi prigionieri”<sup>10</sup>.

Trslt.: “The 30 the enemy invests with superior forces Bonfanti at Castel Cerino, and the 1st of infantry counteracts the attack pursuing the aggressors as far as Montefoscarino taking them several prisoners”.

Notwithstanding its sheer linearity and apparent shortness, the first sentence presents a twenty-nine-word styled semantic construction; a detailed description, signalled by copious explanations.

The first cognitive element we acquire in the process of cultural intelligence is specific chronological order: it expounds the date of the military action, which for proper convenience will be henceforth referred to with the linguistic distinction of combat.

This indication recalls one precise historical date, April 30, 1809.

Further, the narrative enlightens the fact that an ongoing military confrontation between antagonizing parties (Imperial Army troops *versus* Italian battalions, and *vice versa*) was brutal.

The unnamed “*inimico*” (enemy), the *Österreichische Feld-Bataillone*<sup>11</sup>; were opposed by the Italian regular forces.

The scenario of this strategic dispute is set in and around the rough, hilly terrain of the hamlet of Castel Cerino<sup>12</sup>.

The course of the military action pointed to a largely superior Austrian force relying on some *Infanterie Bataillone*<sup>13</sup> manpower, which were directed to assail the area occupied by the Italian units; to collide with the defensive deployment which had Castel Cerino as its prominent feature on the ground, because of its capability of a strong natural defence; and to assault subsequent *tenute forti*<sup>14</sup>, strictly conjoined to the primary defence in the afore-cited rural village.

The relevant numerical disproportion of the engaged units appears somewhat evident, therefore it was an important element.

The Imperial regimental troops had launched a large-scale forward offensive to repel and dislodge the Italian units from their strategic sphere of dominant fortified positions.

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<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Zanoli, *Sulla Milizia Cisalpino-Italiana dal 1796 al 1814*, Borroni e Scotti, 1845, Vol. II, MILANO, PER BORRONI E SCOTTI SUCCESSORI A V. FERRARIO, 1845, p. 86, l. 15-18.

<sup>11</sup> *Id est*, Austrian field units, properly structured in battalions, and properly intended as regimental forces.

<sup>12</sup> District of Soave, neighbourhood of Verona.

<sup>13</sup> *I.e.*, infantry battalions.

<sup>14</sup> *I.e.*, strong points.

This major endeavour, through tactical manoeuvrability on the field, would have been aimed toward the conquest of Castel Cerino, by additional extensive frontal attacks that implied an *Umgehungsmanöver*<sup>15</sup>.

The ostensibly manifest factor of rank superiority would have permitted quite an imposing effort on the Italian-held defensive positions, trying to overpower the weakest points of resistance on the battlefield – this either implied rural houses or open combat, at company and battalion level.

A couple of specific geographical coordinates point to the toughly disputed strategic efforts enacted from Castel Cerino, *via Montefoscarino*.

It was exactly one axis of movement eastwards.

In this way, a precise exposition, with first hand accounted places of reference, significantly portrays the development of the military operations and the phases of prolonged hostilities. Through coeval documentary sources, we have accurate validation that the Italian troops were led by the Brigade Commander, General Antonio Bonfanti.

This General-officer acted in a perfunctory manner to co-operate in his executive responsibilities of rank, and in the operative aims, with an experienced and talented commanding-officer, the Colonel Carlo Zucchi<sup>16</sup>.

Considered the operative profile, the sector was garrisoned by the troops of the First infantry regiment of the Line.

These flexible units, structured at battalion level, included an active force of four field-battalions; a total of nearly 3,200 soldiers.

However, there is confirmed evidence that three mobile units (infantry battalions) stood in full ranks (2,400 men) at Castel Cerino.

## [Part II](#)

## [Part III](#)

## [Part IV](#)

## [Part V](#)

## [Part VI](#)

## [Part VII](#)

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<sup>15</sup> *I.e.*, outflanking manoeuver.

<sup>16</sup> A native of Reggio, in the Emilia (10 March 1777); he died at Reggio, on 19 December 1863. This adamant officer commanded the first Italian regiment of the Line.

[Chronology](#)

[Bibliography](#)

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