

INVITATION TO SOLFERINO AND SAN MARTINO

Brief notes for group guides

“We are sensitive to the shouts of pain that are coming to us from many parts of Italy”. This statement, that Victor Emmanuel II made on January 10th 1859 in front of the Subalpine Parliament, was the call to arms that found answer and fulfilment on the battlefield of San Martino and Solferino on June 24th of that same year.

Prior events

Thanks to the agreements of Plombières, stipulated in June 1858, Emperor Napoleon III had promised Piedmont support against Austria in case of attack. Piedmont started to supply itself with arms and enlist volunteers, partly in the regular army and partly commanded by Garibaldi. On April 23rd Austria ordered Piedmont to disarm within three days. It ignored Austria's request and by April 25th the French Army had crossed the French-Sardinian border.

The plea that Napoleon III made to the French, took a real hold on public opinion, which intervened in favour of Italy. Troops left from Paris, and passing over Mont Cenis arrived at Turin, while Napoleon reached Genoa by sea. The French Army was welcomed with enthusiasm by the Italian people: the Zouaves and the Turcos especially who had been recruited in the colonies and with their fame of wild courage and their bizarre uniforms aroused great interest.

The war

And so a war involving three sovereigns started: from one side Victor Emmanuel II and his ally Napoleon III, from the other Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria, just twenty-nine at the time. All three armies had organizational and strategic problems: in particular the Austrians were unable to stop their adversaries. After battles in Montebello (May 20th), Palestro (May 20th) and Magenta (June 2nd), the French Army marched into Milan (June 7th). The military advance continued after defeating the Austrian Army in Melegnano. On June 17th Victor Emmanuel entered Brescia, followed by Napoleon the next day. From here the two Armies advanced towards the River Mincio beyond which they believed their enemy to be. The Piedmont army that was between Lonato and Desenzano and the French one, a part in Carpenedolo, and a part in Montichiari with Napoleon III, started their reconnaissance.

The start of the battle

The Battle of San Martino, which took place on Friday June 24th was an “unpredicted battle”, that is to say, neither of the two Armies knew that the enemy was so close by. Despite the fact that a few residents had informed them about the presence of the Austrians in the area, the French-Piedmont armies believed that the Austrians were on the other side of the River Mincio. The Austrians, on the other hand, thought their enemies were still near the River Chiese. The two Armies, of a total of about three hundred thousand men, moved towards each other without even being aware of it along a 20 kilometers frontline, extending from the southern shore of Lake Garda all the way to Castelfreddo. The Piedmont forces, next to the Lake, made up the left flank of the battle; the French forces occupied the centre and the right flank.

The topography

The ground where the battle took place is made up of drumlin hills, created from a glacier that moved northwards. These hills, that reach an altitude of 200 meters, have gentle slopes, except for the ones in Solferino, where the Medieval “Spy of Italy” emerges, so called for the exceptional view you can admire from its top, where the ancient Fortress of the Gonzaga stands.

In 1859, these hills were covered with natural vegetation in the north and cultivated with vineyards in the south. The Fortress hill in Solferino was completely spare, apart from a small group of cypresses where a bitter battle took place. The soil was arid and rocky. There were cereal crops and meadowland in the less dry areas, grapevines and mulberries in the damper ones. The road network was quite developed: in the north, the road winding along the lake connected Lonato, Desenzano, Rivoltella and Peschiera; parallel to this road was the railway. In the south, another road connected Brescia, Castiglione, Guidizzolo and Mantua. Other minor roads crossed with the above mentioned.

The battle

June 24th was an extremely sultry day. The troops were supposed to leave at 9:00 am, but at 3:00 am the first shootings could be heard, as the outposts of the two armies came into contact with each other: a double ration of eau de vie (brandy) was distributed, but the soldiers did not have time to get their food rations and they were not distributed at all on that day. At 6:00 am the battle was in full swing. The terrain, completely unknown to the French, made their advance difficult due to the intertwining grapevines and mulberry bushes. The Austrians, stationed over the hills, could target the French Army easily with their artillery. The battle became more and more intense.

There were, in fact, two battles (maybe three): the French first fought in Medole and Guidizzolo, then in Solferino, being able to expel the Austrians thanks to the decisive intervention of the Imperial Guard, the special Military Corps of the Emperor. The Piedmont army, on the other hand, first fought in Pozzolengo, Madonna della Scoperta, then in San Martino as well, over the rock, at Contracania and in the various farms in that area. Here, Austrian resistance was tougher, so much so that positions were occupied and lost more than once on that day.

Around 4:00 pm a storm broke out and the Austrian started to retreat from Solferino heading to the River Mincio; their comrades fighting in San Martino also retreated when they received the order, so the Piedmont army settled on the hill of San Martino and at Madonna della Scoperta.

The aftermath of the battle

At the end of this day, the battlefield was filled with dead bodies and the severely wounded. There were over ten thousand dead, not counting the thousands of injured who often died afterwards, and the missing soldiers.

But the war did not only hit the soldiers, also the civilians suffered a tough loss: houses and fields were destroyed, trees were cut down, cattle killed or stolen. Even the cemeteries, turned into fortresses, were completely raised to the ground.

The armistice of Villafranca

At the end of the battle Napoleon III, though victorious, decided to retreat without helping his ally until the end of the battle, as promised. Although Austria was by then at a clear disadvantage, both Emperors wanted to bring an end to the hostilities. Austria decided then to negotiate with France sacrificing the Lombardo-Veneto territory. On July 11th the two Emperors met in Villafranca: as a result of a gesture of contempt from Franz Joseph to Victor Emmanuel II, Lombardy was given to the Kingdom of Sardinia through France. After this “betrayal” the spirit between the two allies worsened.

However, despite the armistice agreements, the Italians were moving quickly towards Unification: after the enterprise carried out by Garibaldi in 1860, southern Italy was freed from the Bourbons and in 1861 the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed. In 1866 thanks to the alliance with Prussia against Austria, Italy obtained the territory of Veneto and in 1870 Rome was taken by force and snatched from the Pope.

The creation of the Red Cross

From this bloody battle an important institution was born and founded: the Red Cross. Henry Dunant, a Swiss business man originally from Geneva, happened by chance to be present at the Battle of Solferino and San Martino or, at least, to see its tragic consequences. Shocked by the vision of the dead bodies and the abandoned wounded soldiers, he, with the help of the people of Castiglione, gathered and treated the injured from both sides of the battle. In 1862 he published, at his own expense, a book entitled “A memory of Solferino” in which, in addition to describing the horror and the pain he had witnessed, he asked the following question: ‘Would it not be possible, in time of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of having care given to the wounded in wartime by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers?’ His work became very popular and a favourable response to this project started spreading all over Europe, which saw fulfilment at the Conference of Geneva in 1864. Here, thanks to the tireless work of Dunant, the Red Cross was born. Its flag is inspired by the Swiss flag with the colours inverted. At the Red Cross Memorial, in Solferino, our Association has engraved on a memorial stone the words that sum up the meaning of the work of Henry Dunant:” From the tragic vision of the battlefield and from the example of solidarity of the people in the face of human suffering came the inspiration of Henry Dunant for the universal idea of the Red Cross”.

The visit

If this general information can easily be found in any history book, a visit to San Martino and Solferino can allow you to relive that dramatic and very important day in Italian history. As a matter of fact, in 1870, after the exhumation of thousands of remains of dead soldiers, the Association of Solferino e San Martino was founded and, in addition to acquiring the properties where the battle took place, thus avoiding their inevitable fate, also worked on the erection of some monuments that, even after more than one hundred years, still offer their testimony intact.

SAN MARTINO

The Charnel-house in San Martino

The noble Chapel of the Tracagni Counts, owners of the Contraçania farmhouse, also on the battlefield of the fight, was used during the skirmish as a fortress; there and nearby hundreds of soldiers from both fronts lost their lives as the many gravestones with their names, age, provenance and military rank engraved on them remind us. Words that, to this day, touch our visitors. On June 24th 1870, at the final disinterment of the remains, the bones of more than two thousand and five hundred soldiers were collected and preserved by the Association in this temple where a gravestone in Latin, German, French and Italian states that those who were enemies during the battle are now resting united in the peace of the sepulchre. The exhibition of the remains, on which we can see terrible wounds, wants to make visitors aware that war is, in any case, a thing to abhor.



The tower

The Tower, about 64 meters high, rises over the rock, the theatre of bloody battles. At night, from its top a guiding light irradiates the three colours of the Italian flag and this light can be seen from very far away. It was inaugurated in 1893 and is dedicated to Victor Emmanuel II who died in 1878. As the visitor enters, he is welcomed by likenesses of the protagonists of the Unification of Italy, Victor Emmanuel II, Cavour, Garibaldi and Mazzini, as well as numerous frescos that illustrate some moments of the Risorgimento. Walking up the 400 meter tall staircase leading to the top of the Tower the most important moments of the Risorgimento are exhibited through frescos presented in chronological order starting from 1848 (1st war of independence) to 1870 (the Breach of Porta Pia). Once on the terrace, the visitor can enjoy, on clear days, the landscape that embraces the whole scene of the battlefield.

The museum

The museum dates back to 1939 and it is divided into three different rooms that display weapons, heirlooms and documents, some of which are very touching. Near the cannonballs, (The Soprano, The Tyroler, Micca, Pietro), the rifles, the bayonets, the bullets, many objects from everyday life are preserved such as pipes, hand-painted playing cards, letters, buttons, ID tags, cutlery, a handkerchief stained with blood, etc; they are all poor objects that help us relive the day-to-day life of the many men who did not return to their families. There are objects that belonged to the Austrians as well, reminding us that the fate of many of them was no different from that of their enemies.

In a designated room inside the museum, it is possible to watch a video that fully reconstructs in precise details the historic events of the battle.

SOLFERINO

If San Martino was the place where the battle between the Piedmont and the Austrian armies took place, Solferino was the scene of the face-off between the French and the Austrians which ended with the victory of the French Army.



The Charnel-House

The bones, exhumed by teams of farmers ten years after the battle, were carried from the Church of Saint Peter in Vincoli, where they are exhibited as a memory and a warning of the horrors of the war. The remains of almost seven thousand soldiers, French and Austrian, all mingled together. You can access the shrine walking along a picturesque cypress-lined avenue, whose melancholic atmosphere reminds the visitor that also here the battle took place.

The Museum

The Museum of Solferino collects material that illustrates the history of Italy from 1797 to 1870, keeping, of course, a special place reserved for the great battle. Even here, next to the “great history of Italy”, represented by cannons, uniforms, portraits and weapons, the visitor can find the “small history” of the soldiers in their ordinary objects, such as the military service cards found on the dead bodies of the soldiers, or puppets hand-made by the soldiers themselves. The bright livery of the Zouave, which keeps its stage impact intact, is particularly impressive.



The fortress

The “Spy of Italy” is a 23 meters high Tower dating back to 1022, erected at the top of the hill that witnessed the most vicious events during the battle. Also here, apart from the interesting heirlooms, the visitors on arriving at the terrace are offered a scenic view that allows them to admire the Apennines.

In conclusion: to the roots of our homeland history

At the entrance of the Tower of San Martino a sign on a pruned cypress, tells us that the tree “was deprived of its top by a cannonball on June 24th 1859”, letting us experience how it feels to see and touch something that is still alive after being wounded during a battle that took place one hundred and fifty years ago.

San Martino and Solferino have this feature: everything seems to take us back to that same day, or, at least, to those years. The calm peace of the shrines, the engravings written in an old-fashioned language from the 1800's, the simplicity of the museums (the one in San Martino is in the fields), the rural landscape, the almost naive faith in the future that emerges from the frescos and from the documents make this visit an experience that goes beyond the usual field-trip and let us get closer to the roots of our homeland history.

