

# Solferino

*Joseph McGeer*

My wife Eileen and I have visited Lake Garda in Italy, particularly Peschiera Del Garda, many times. It lies about 20kms west of the city of Verona. The town itself is both beautiful and has a fascinating history. It dates back to Roman times and has impressive 16<sup>th</sup> century fortifications. It stands on the southern shore of the lake where the waters flow into the outflowing stream called Mincio and it is completely surrounded by canals.



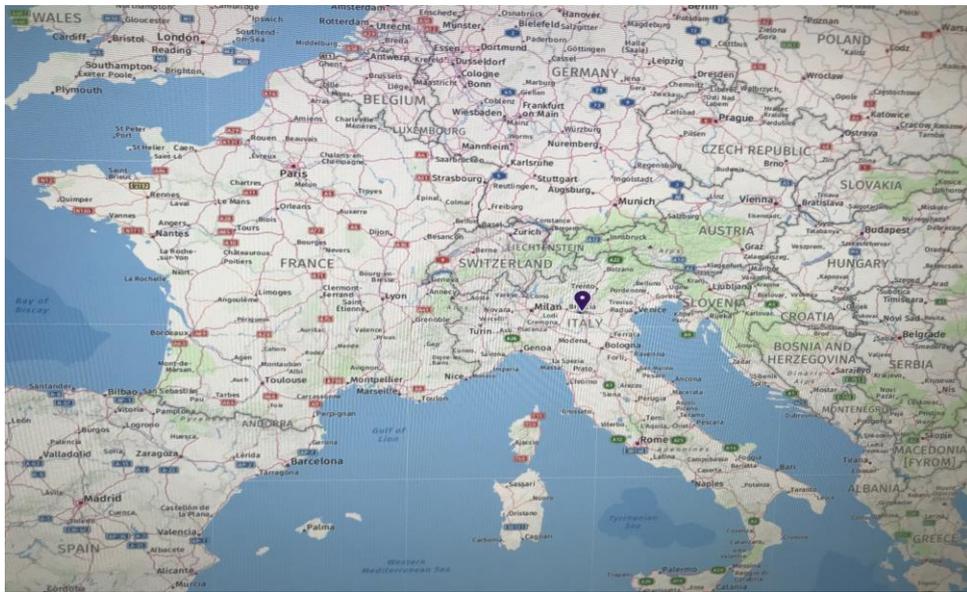
*Peschiera Del Garda*

We have taken day trips to many places in the area. One of the most interesting places lies about 10kms south of Peschiera. It is the small village of Solferino. Today there are a number of memorials and places of interest and if you were ever in the area I would recommend a trip.

On 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1859 a large battle took place around Solferino. The battle was the largest and most decisive battle in the campaign known as the 'Risorgimento', which, in 1861, led to a declaration of independence of an Italian state and eventually to unification and an independent Italy in 1870. The battle was fought between the French with allies from Piedmont (the province of modern Italy around Turin) and the Austrians. The numbers of soldiers involved is, even now, not clear, but estimates are around 300,000 in total with roughly equal numbers on both sides.

The battle was fought over a wide area bounded on the north by the 10kms along lake Garda from Rivoltella to Peschiera. It then stretched south approximately 15 kms and was centred around Solferino which stands on a small hill with commanding views of the whole area. The village was

therefore a vital target for both sides given the views from the tower, and as a possible site for artillery.



*Solferino on map of Europe. Indicated by the blue pin.*

The battle was won by the French and Piedmontese but the cost was very high. The French and Piedmontese together suffered over 17,000 killed, wounded and missing, and the Austrians over 20,000. The battle had been fierce and fought in very high temperatures. Thirst and fatigue prevented the French from pursuing their enemy, who retreated in an orderly fashion eastwards.

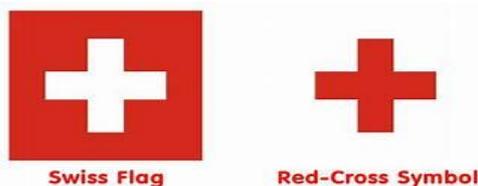


*Image of the battle of Solferino*



*Solferino showing the church and some of the Red Cross buildings. This is taken from the tower. It also illustrates the commanding view.*

On the day of the battle a Swiss man Henry Dunant, on business in the area, observed the battle. He was horrified by the slaughter below him but was even more upset by the fact that there seemed to be little or no care provided for the wounded. On the day he did his best to care for the wounded and dying, helped by local women volunteers. Later this included writing letters to their families. They treated the men equally, regardless of what side they had fought on, inspiring the women to coin the phrase "tutti fratelli" (all brothers). He decided to do try to do something more about it. He did. He founded the Red Cross and used the reverse of the Swiss national flag as its emblem.



The Red Cross website describes the scene witnessed by Dunant:-

*... viewing amputations without anaesthetic, and groaning, fly-covered men who had been left for dead. "Some, who had gaping wounds already beginning to show infection...begged to be put out of their misery, and writhed with faces distorted in the grip of the death struggle," Dunant wrote. Others were "disfigured...their limbs stiffened, their bodies blotched with ghastly spots, their hands clawing at the ground, their eyes staring wildly." At the end of his book, Dunant suggested "permanent societies of volunteers who in time of war would give help to the wounded without regard for their nationality." This vision*

*for the Red Cross, championed by Gustave Moynier of the Geneva Public Welfare Society, became a reality the following year.*

In 1901, Henry Dunant was awarded the first-ever Nobel Peace Prize for what was described as the "supreme humanitarian achievement of the 19th century". Until I began this research I believed the Red Cross to be an international body. It is not. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a private humanitarian committee made up of entirely Swiss nationals. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) was founded in 1919 and today it coordinates activities among the 190 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies within the Movement. Each national society works in its home country. However each must adopt the principles of the Red Cross to be recognised and affiliated.

We had visited the site before, but in 2014 we were on holiday in Peschiera with friends, Stephen and Irene, and took them to Solferino. The village includes several places of interest including the tower, the castle, a museum, several buildings and memorials owned by the Red Cross, and an ossuary. The last place on our walk around the area was to the ossuary. I had been talking about the place as we again tried to find it. Irene finally said "What is an ossuary"? I decided not to say until we went in.



*Picture of Stephen and Irene before we went into the ossuary*

Irene was horrified, and not best pleased with me. Ossuaries were commonly used to inter the skulls or bones of soldiers killed in battle whose names were not known.



*Skulls on display at the Ossuary in Solferino*

The largest ossuary I have ever seen is at Verdun in France, which contains the bones of an estimated 146,000 unknown soldiers killed during the Battle of Verdun in 1916. The battle was probably the largest and longest battle in world history with an estimated 700,000 casualties (dead, wounded and missing). The size of the battlefield was much the same as that at Solferino with its 37,000 casualties.

Solferino was a large battle, for example larger than Waterloo in 1815, or Gettysburg in 1863, but much less well known in the UK. At least some good came of it.

---

## *Sources*

*Encyclopaedia Britannica*  
*ICRC website*

*All pictures are by the author, or free for use.*