

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT32: 15 – 18 December 1914 (December 4)

General Situation

As Christmas approached, a spell of home leave was the most precious prize of the survivors of those who had marched to war four months previously. This was impossible for many of them. Every German and French Army engaged on the Marne had cancelled all leave as the supreme crisis approached. Leave was equally hard to come by in the BEF, which was preparing for another attack in Northern France. Ordinary Russian soldiers were hardly considered to have any homes they needed to go to. Indian soldiers in Iraq and Europe were not entitled to any interruption of their service either.

Despite this, many a Central European Schloss received home a favoured son, or, better, a relative who was a staff officer, for a couple of weeks and the conditions of the war became more widely known as a result. In Austria-Hungary there was widespread concern that the early stages of the conflict had not gone to plan. Serbia remained defiant; Galicia was lost; and Przemysl surrounded. It was also not forgotten that Italy had defied pressure to give up neutrality and it was an open secret that the Empire was facing intolerable demands from the Italians to preserve this stance.



Figure 1: Original Admiralty Map, used to help plan British and French merchant shipping requirements, mid-December 1914.

There was rather more satisfaction about the situation in Germany. The loss of North East Prussia was greatly regretted but there was still immense pride in the fact that not only had the French and

British been beaten (as was sincerely believed) but the Russians were being steadily pushed back as well. It seemed that Germany could cope with the long feared two-front war. It was true, none of Germany's opponents had yet given up, not even the ridiculously stubborn Belgians. Still events were going in the right direction. German opinion was led to believe, without difficulty, that come the New Year, the French would see sense, the British would want to get back to trade and commerce, and the Russians would pay the price for their violation of Prussia. Clearly, the Tsar could not expect his rule over Poland to continue.

There was some disappointment that the German Navy had not had a proper chance to display its capabilities. The exploits of the raiders and other actions on distant oceans had not altered the basic fact that the sea was the realm of the Entente. Nevertheless, there were few persons of influence in the Reich or the Hapsburg Empire that truly understood the difficulties that their separation from world trade might cause in the long run. It seemed that the territories of the Central Powers controlled more than enough food and other raw materials to prosecute the war. In theory, this was correct, but it was hard to calculate in the fact that the war had massively disrupted labour and transportation resources and every advance of the armies meant the growth of an occupied population which also had to be fed.

West

After their success at Coulommiers (5-3.1017), the French awaited the next German move knowing it might be the decisive turn of the 2nd Battle of the Marne.

The critical development was von Bülow's reaction to the repulse he had just suffered. He blamed von Hausen for not clearing the French salients around Montmiral, "Les Dents de Montmiral" (5-3.1217) as they were dubbed. These positions were in Von Bülow's rear flank and he conceived they must be eliminated before an advance on Paris could be successful. Von Hausen was more doubtful for Les Dents were disrupting the communications to his own forces at Montmiral (5-3.1317) and he had a higher estimation of the French trenches than Von Bülow.

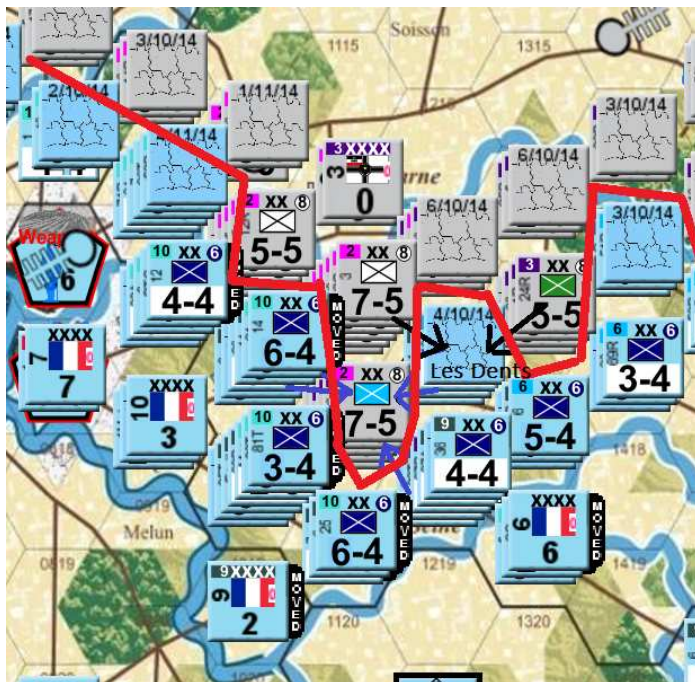


Figure 2: 2nd Battle of the Marne, Les Dents de Montmiral, and the French Counterattack, 15 - 18 December 1914.

Von Bülow nevertheless insisted that he would turn part of his own force around and eliminate the left-most tooth before the French could react. Von Hausen would help from the Montmiral side and the French would be squeezed from the position. This attack was executed on 15 - 16 December and the Germans subjected the French defenders to a terrible cross fire. However, the French trenches proved themselves and after two days effort the German attacks petered out with the French survivors still holding out and expecting reinforcement.

Joffre watched these developments with great interest. It seemed the Germans had turned away from Paris and might be vulnerable now to a culminating French counter-stroke from the West. For two days, Joffre studied the situation as reports came in of the successful defence of Les Dents. The most exposed German forces were those which had penetrated towards Provins who were between Les Dents and the French main force. The Saxon Corps was known to be there and this gave some caution to Joffre's plan. While a more limited attack featured in the first draft of his plan, it quickly became clear that the attack could not succeed unless it was done with every available man. That meant that the 7th, 10th, 9th and 6th Armies would all be engaged to the utmost extent, save that significant forces remained in defensive positions covering the Paris front.

Joffre also asked that the British attack simultaneously so that the Germans were under maximum pressure. This request was complied with though Sir John French did not consider the conditions for an attack were ideal given the depleted state of the majority of British infantry formations. Neither was there much time for planning or originality. Therefore the British attacked near La Bassee (5-3.1008) once again on 17 December. This was a small disaster. Although the German defences here were ill defined and improvised they were more than adequate to stop a rather half-hearted British effort. With heavy losses and no visible gain, this was the first British attack that attracted widespread criticism in the Army. The strategic purpose of assisting Joffre was barely recognised.

Joffre's main attack began at 0700 on 17 December. He launched parts of four French Armies against four German Divisions holding the most exposed part of the whole German line, stretching south from La Ferté-Gaucher towards Provins (5-3.1118). They faced French attacks from the front and the rear. Joffre did not spare the artillery either, making sure that his infantry attacks were well supported by as much ordinance as could be mustered. Only truly excellent soldiers could have resisted this attack. The German 39th Division was furthest south. It did not hold Provins, though some of its patrols had been through it. On 17 December, this formation was crushed by overwhelming numbers before noon. The same fate threatened to destroy the Saxon Corps but somehow the two Saxon Divisions (32nd and 40th) managed to stabilise the situation taking up positions facing opposite directions like two sword fighters beset by enemies and covering each other's backs. The 6th Bavarian Division also did valuable work in helping the Saxon's stand their ground.

On 18 December, the French were surprised to find the Germans still in the field. Worse, the French had to cope with a fairly serious German counter-attack. It was hardly a clear cut French victory, but Joffre and his supporters made it seem so. A few trophies of the 39th Division were quickly driven to Paris.

East

The long expected fall of Kielce occurred on 15 December during a late season mild spell. Woyrsh's Army cleared out the last Russian detachments in the city, but this was just a side detail of fierce fights which were occurring across a broad front from Końskie (5-5.2003) in the north and Rakow (5-5.2307) to the south east. At Końskie, the German 9th Army started to press against the right flank of the Russian 9th Army which was forced to give up ground. The left wing of the Russian 9th was also

struggling against the Austrian 1st Army which attempted to break the Russian defence line which was positioned in close terrain along the escarpments around Rakow. The Russian defences here and elsewhere could only be preserved by with a disproportionate sacrifice of Russian infantry who were fed into the battle as fast as uncommitted units could be directed there.

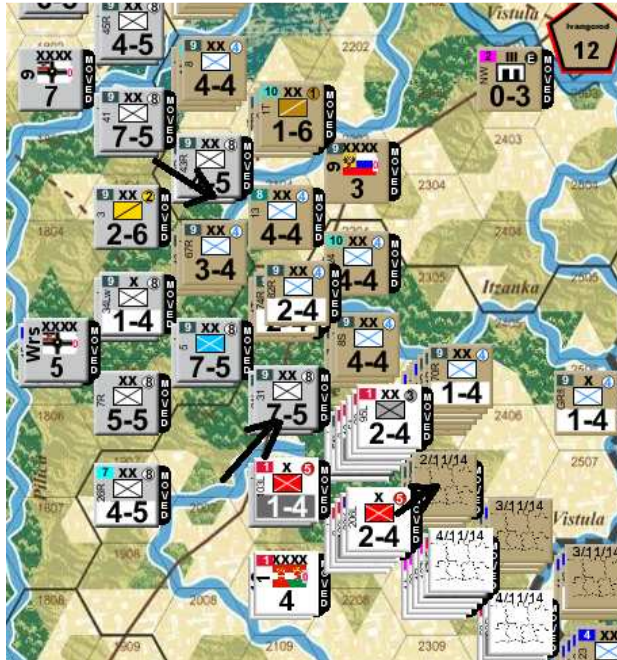


Figure 3: The Russian 9th Army under attack; the loss of Kielce, 15 - 16 December 1914.

The German 8th Army scored a celebrated success on 16 December when the 50th Reserve Division crossed the Narew at Nowogród (4-5.2213) between Lomsha and Ostralenko. The movement across the river could not be prevented by the thin Cossack cordon which was the only defence the Russians had along the river line. However, within the next couple of days, as the Germans solidified their grip on the right bank of the sluggish river, the Russians began to accumulate the force with which they hoped to stem further German movement on this front. This included the 1st Cavalry Corps which had come down from occupied East Prussia.

Serbia

There was no significant military initiative in mid-December in Serbia. The Serbian government was growing a little concerned about its isolation. It had hoped to welcome a Russian Army by this time. The Serbian Ambassador in Petrograd (as it was now known) had not been able to get any firm timetable from the Russian military liaison officers that confirmed when the Russian Army might return to offensive operations.

The Near East

In the Eastern Mediterranean there was naval reconnaissance going on as the Allied fleets explored the coasts of Turkey and Greece.

The Mesopotamian Corps continued building up a concentration intended to be of three Indian Brigades at Ali Garbi.

In the Caucasus, the Turkish and Kurdish cavalry finally got themselves organised to confront the Russian Frontier Guards who had penetrated to Lake Van. However, by 18 December, the Russian force was moving away up the Murat Valley and away from danger.

December 1914 DM Situation

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	5	4	16	20				10	45	560	Good
Austria-Hungary	4	-	-	1				6	11	221	Good
Ottoman	1	-	-	-				NA	1	10	Good – *An-Nasariyah lost.
Central Powers	10	4	16	21				16	67	791	
France	-	7	8	15				-	30	550	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	9				-	9	57	Good
Russia	8	1	6	4*				NA	13	255	Good - *Kielce lost
Belgium	-	-	-	-				NA	-	(95)	NA
Serbia	(1)	-	-	-				NA	(1)	(12)	NA
Entente	8	8	14	28				-	58	862	

Player Notes

- CP: East: Reinforcements have started to arrive, dispatched from the west. Having pushed the Russian back out of the Masurian Lakes area I now launch an attack to seize a bridgehead across the Pregel near the confluence with the Narew and SW of the Lomsha fortifications. There is only a light cavalry screen defending which I expect to withdraw without a fight. 9th Army also attacks the Russian 9th Army between the Pilica and Radomska rivers in the direction of Radom; whilst 60 km to the south I also attack to clear a weak Russian brigade from the town of Kielce. This is conducted with some Austrian support in the form of a light brigade; the German and AH forces working collaboratively along this boundary between their armies now.
- Galicia: AH has spent significant time reorganising, rebuilding armies and stockpiling supply as it slowly manoeuvred into position. It is now in position to launch its strongest attack since August with the weather hopefully causing some surprise to the Russians. Its focal point is to try and break the trench line SE of Kielce and is also collaborative with the Germans; some German brigades participating.
- Serbia: No attacks in Serbia. The weather is too foul for Balkan mountain shenanigans!
- West: The west poses some interesting conundrums for me. I have desisted with the artillery raids on Verdun. It only has 5 factors of strength left but it uses too much precious supply to chip away at a fortification point each turn. I wanted to keep his own artillery fixed by the threat of my artillery attacks. I think, crumbled ruin that it is,

that Verdun still holds emotional value for the French. The conundrum is more about where to shift forces and supply to try and achieve some sort of year end advance to retain initiative into 1915. My own dispositions answer the question for me. He has a salient between the Seine and the Marne where he is relatively weak and, by clearing it and advancing my line here, I can also narrow the frontage his position is forcing me to cover by around 60km. It would be a good way to hunker down into year end. It entails risk, but just may succeed. If it fails, he should still take some heavy casualties and be faced with the decision as to whether he keeps throwing troops into this grinding mill. Playing through this game you can see how decisions like Verdun may have been made; a feeling of positional advantage where you might be able to wear the enemy down and "bleed him white" more than you bleed yourself.

- *Caucasus: Nothing of note.*
- *Mesopotamia: No change. I have not deemed it worthwhile to risk losses to the south. Let the imperialists advance into the desert.*
- *Palestine: Nothing of note.*

AP: As with much of this game so far, it is difficult to feel that events on the non-western fronts are of much importance compared with what is happening in France.

I wasn't totally surprised to see the Germans turn back to attack the salient at Les Dents de Montmiral. I thought SR 22-18 meant the trenches didn't apply but this was not correct as I had two supporting hexes. The main thing from my point of view was it used up most of the remaining German supply on the Western Front. I had used no supply for any counterattacks anywhere (and forgot to apply the winter bonus - hence the warm spell) so I now had a distinct supply advantage on the western front.

According to my plan, I should have just left it at that and let the Germans try again next turn or give up. With few supply points they will not make much progress in France for the rest of the month.

But I could not help myself. I realised I could get 80 French SP around the German salient and attack with 75 combat strength. This would have a one in three chance of destroying 3 German Divisions (one through over stacking on retreat) with a maximum German DM of 19 in one attack. It is hard to resist that even though it threw away 16 supply points I would like to have next turn. I realised if I didn't attack now the Germans would withdraw into better positions and I would have to attack later with poorer prospects. I rolled a 4 instead of the 5 or 6 needed for a clearer victory, but 12 hits on the Germans is a reasonable reward. I just wish they could not fire back (8 hits).

Because the French attacked the British had to help out as well. Even though this attack was likely to have a poor loss ratio (if, as they did, the German committed the last of their supply to it), I nevertheless did it because it helps the Entente overall. This game is very good at modelling Coalition dynamics. The British have been husbanding their strength (selfish) because they do not have so much to spare, but now at a critical moment they come out and do their best for the team.