

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT51: 6 – 9 March 1915 (March 2)

General Situation

The mood in France was very buoyant. The news of the attack in Alsace had electrified the whole country as the campaign chimed perfectly with popular war aims. Joffre would have preferred to stop the whole offensive after the initial momentum exhausted itself but he felt forced to drive his subordinates into making a serious effort to reach the Rhine.

Western diplomats were also very satisfied because, on 8 March, Italy signed the preliminary protocols of a treaty which bound her to join the Entente before the end of May. Now it was thought the squeeze would really be put on Austria – Hungary. This, however, was dependent on Russia applying its might against the Hapsburgs. The fall of Przemysl had been a factor encouraging the Italians to commit themselves. However, despite promises to the contrary, Russia had no certain capacity to strike effectively at Austria any more. Across the whole of the Eastern theatre, the Entente was actually on the defensive and even retreating. This was true also of the Near Eastern fronts where both Britain and Russia were on the back foot facing a resurgent Ottoman Empire which was starting to find the ability to move forward.

The Western Front

The Germans had reinforced their 7th Army and the fortress of Neu Breisach stood as a serious obstacle to any further French advances towards Colmar and Strasbourg. Joffre nevertheless authorised the French 1st and 2nd Armies to push for the Rhine south of Neu Breisach. The Germans had trenches there running towards Ensisheim (5-3.2922), manned by Landwehr. They had a hard time holding against the cream of the French Army including an elite North African Division (48th Algerian) and the Alpinists of the 47th Division. Nevertheless, after the French attack peaked on 9 March, the German line was still intact.



Figure 1: The Marne and the Second Attack at Conty, 6 - 9 March 1915.

Despite the political value of a possible advance to the Rhine, the main French effort in early March was in the centre between Picardy and the Marne. The German operations against the French at Conty (5-3.0712) were kept up with a second stronger attack by General Stranz' Army Detachment on

6 – 7 March that kept the French 5th Army on the defensive and unable to support the French 10th Army on its right flank. This was important because, alone, the 10th Army was insufficiently strong to make a thrust for Compiègne despite the evidence, from French patrols, that the Germans would not defend anything west of the Falkenhayn line.

On the Marne, the French were moving forward more rapidly. After securing Château-Thierry (5-3.1216), the French 6th Army found Dormans (5-3.1316) abandoned by the Germans on 8 March. In the next two days, the French V Corps secured the remainder of the south bank of the Marne. The XXVII Corps in the French 9th Army was bolder and advanced on the north side of the river and took back Lizy and Betz (5-3.1116) on 8 and 9 March. Betz was nearly 20 kilometres beyond their starting positions. There was negligible resistance from the Germans.

The Eastern Front



Figure 2: The Wiskitki Encirclement, 5 - 9 March 1915

The fighting on the Eastern Front was noted now for its remorseless character. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were animated by a conviction that the Russian Army was close to collapse after months of intensifying pressure. Their will activated their subordinates and even at a distance their Austrian allies. By the end of the first week in March it would have been easier to list the quiet sectors (the Western Carpathians and the Narew) than to describe the main loci of the struggle.

The intensity of the fighting was partly due to the fact that the Russians would not give ground easily or at all. The Russian 11th Army refused to give up the Prislop Pass (5-5.4217) despite repeated attacks by the Kovess Army. The Russian 4th Army held off probing attacks by German and Austrian forces testing their defences between the Itzanka and Vistula. In Prussia, Rennenkampf's 1st Army resisted another major attempt by the Germans to reach the Pregel east of Insterberg (4-5.2006). There on 5 – 6 March five German Divisions were pitched against an equal number of Russian Divisions. If the Russians had been pushed back from the railway leading to Insterberg, it was probable the Russians would have had to withdraw across the Pregel. The Russians counterattacked fiercely on 6 March and Rennenkampf made sure that the units involved were well supported with ordnance. The evidence of the fighting in Prussia and elsewhere did not necessarily show that the Russians were on the point of giving up.

However, the strength of Russian Divisions at the front was steadily declining. This was shown at Warsaw. On 6 March, Woysch's Army got the German 19th and 5th Bavarian Divisions forward to Ozarów Mazowiecki (4-5.1919) after driving weak Russian units back behind Warsaw's forts. This force was met by a Landwehr column which had marched unopposed through the Kampinoski Forest from Sladów (4-5.1818). This completed an encirclement of a Russian Infantry Division (51st) and a Cossack Division (North Caucasian) trapped between Wiskitki and Blonie (4-5.1819). The surrounded Russians meekly surrendered *en masse* on 9 March when it became clear no rescue would be attempted.

These German advances brought them right up to the outer defences of Warsaw. Across the Vistula the great fortress of Novo Georgievsk loomed. Suddenly the appalling prospect of a modern battle in a great European city looked likely. With this the Pope was stirred to issue on 8 March his famous admonition (known as Vatican 39 – 16) to the Great Powers to desist from their quarrels and make peace. This was going to fall on deaf ears but the Pope alternatively argued that if this war had to continue it would be inhumane to fight through the streets of Warsaw. Papal envoys urged the Grand-Duke to withdraw from the city while Ludendorff was told to go around it. Neither recipient of this advice was willing to confirm that they would depart from whatever was militarily expedient.

Serbia

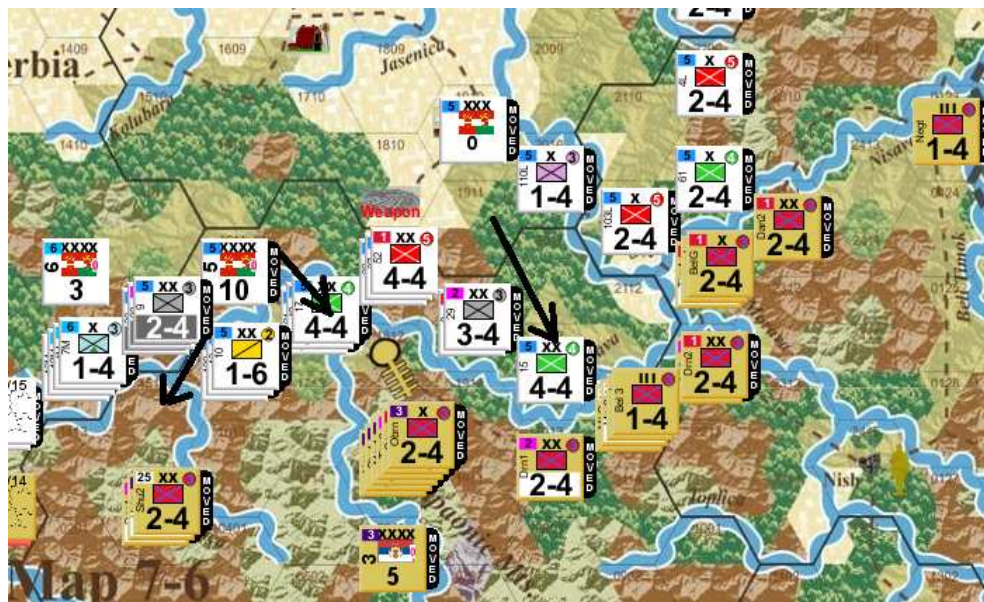


Figure 3: The Austrians on the Western Morava River, 5 - 9 March 1915.

On 6 March, the Austrian 5th Army started unopposed crossings of the Western Morava between Ovčar Banja (6-5.1612) and Čačak (6-5.1712). There was fighting further west on 7 March when the Serbians sought to delay a crossing of the Moravica at Požega (6-5.1513).

By the following day, the Serbians were starting to withdraw again. Many of the Serbians thought that if they retired into the mountains of the south and west of Serbia, the Austrians would eventually give up the pursuit. That was of little comfort to the inhabitants of Nish. Although a circular of the Army, signed by the Crown Prince, had declared that Nish would be defended, the chief newspaper in the town reported on 8 March that over 70% of the rent payable in the city had

been unpaid at the start of the month. It was impossible to hire a wagon to remove furniture and valuables from the threatened city.

The Near East

On 8 March, the commander of the British XVI Corps was rudely awakened in the early hours to be told the Turks were at Bear Al Abd (8-8.1338) and barely 60 miles east of the Canal. This was a massive intelligence failure. The Turks were less than three days march away from the windpipe of the British Empire. The Turkish XX Corps had left Gaza a week previously and had been completely unnoticed.

Panic was then spread by telegraph to all the units garrisoning the Canal and within a few hours they were marching and counter-marching up and down the western side of the waterway in a great show of activity lacking any coherent purpose. In 1933, a pacifist philosopher and mathematician famously used this case in a critique of military psychology and demonstrated that (by prohibiting movements into the sea and desert) that random movements of the British forces deployed in Egypt would tend to result in a concentration of much of their limited strength at Ismailia. This was a relatively good position from which to react to any enemy move on Port Said or Suez.

At the time, the Turkish march on the Canal was just one example of the resurgence of the Ottoman Empire in early 1915. In Iraq, Townsend's Mesopotamian Corps had fallen back to Al Amarah and had so far been unable to stand against the Turkish force which had moved forward over 100 miles from Kut. In the Caucasus, the Turks had recaptured Van on 6 March and were advancing rapidly to the north and east against the fleeing Russians who were struggling to escape the rapid pursuit.



Figure 4: The Russians attack at Dag Deliler, 8 - 9 March 1915.

East of Erzerum, the Turks were, however, fighting to hold their positions. The Russian Caucasus Army was now firmly under the control of General Yudenitch acting as chief for the nominal commander, Grand-Duke Nicholai. On 8 March, the Russians launched their spring offensive in the mountains between Gerdekkaya and Deliler (6-8.2318), ignoring for the time being their collapsing front at Van. The Russians employed four Divisions and several smaller units under the tactical command of the III Caucasian Corps. They were

opposed by the Turkish 17th Division which was outnumbered and losing men rapidly to effective Russian attacks. On 9 March the Russians were threatening to seize the heights of Dag Deliler and the 17th Division was desperately seeking aid from its neighbours.

March 1915 DM Summary

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	11	14						15	40	684	Good
Austria-Hungary	16*	3						-	19	321	Good *Przemysl lost
Ottoman	-	2						NA	2	13	Good
Central Powers	27	19						15	51	1008	
France	10	6						-	16	582	Good
Great Britain	-	-						-	-	70	Good
Russia	12	17						NA	29	357	Good
Belgium	-	-						NA	-	(95)	NA
Serbia	-	(1)						NA	(1)	(16)	NA
Entente	22	23						-	45	1009	

Player Notes

- *CP: East: I feel that I have the Russians on the back foot. He is taking a battering and is already quite a bit over halfway to Shaken Morale. Keeping pressure on him is vital to shoring up AH; even though French gains in Alsace make ignoring that area in favour of concentrating on Russia a dangerous game. Still, I have chosen my course and must stick with it. Most of my offensive effort is thus focussed on Russia. I attack un-entrenched 1st Army divisions – all seriously weakened – along the Pregel with a view to driving them across the river and starting to isolate his northern trench lines. I'm hoping to put enough pressure on him to force him to withdraw from these trenches voluntarily. He can, once he starts to withdraw, trade space for time. The further I get from railheads, the longer it will take replacements and supply to get to where they are needed. My 9th Army also continues its attacks on the approaches to Warsaw. It is not well supplied, but there is a quantity of supply now inbound. I am in a position to start considering bombarding Warsaw. Sud Army collaborates with the AH 1st Army to start attacking positions on the Itzanka River.*
- *Galicia: Kovess keeps chipping away at the flank and is now starting to loop cavalry around the open flank. A railhead on the north bank of the Moldava River has allowed me to rail some formations well around to his SE. The other AH attack is the one in conjunction with Germany's Sud Army.*
- *Serbia: Finally 5th Army is in a position to launch an attack along the confluence of the Morasvica and W Morava rivers. These casualties will continue to wear away Serbia's ability to resist; made easier by my having seized his only weapons factory. He is using the mountains and rivers to slowly delay his way back towards Nish and*

Skopje; but I have started to get around his eastern flank in the W Morava valley and separate his 1st and 2nd armies from his 3^d.

- *West: I have been hammered in the Vosges. I started to draw down forces in this area in January to reinforce the armies in the west of France; leaving mostly brigades holding the trenches in the Vosges. He has seized opportunity and cleared the trenches SW and NW of Neu Breisach on the west bank of the Rhine. I have to be honest and say I have been lucky with dice rolls this round. Each of the brigades only took 50% loss allowing a nucleus to fall back; and counterattacks were strong. I am forced to establish a thin and weak line in this area and send much needed supplies and RPL to 6th and 7th armies. This does not stop me from maintaining pressure in the west. I move divisions laterally along my new line – mostly ZOC free – to enable a strengthening of my right wing and launch a very strong attack out of Amiens again.*
- *Caucasus: By holding the Erzerum valley open I have been able to shift forces and supply down towards Van. A concentration of forces there has forced him to start withdrawing.*
- *Mesopotamia: I continue to advance cautiously along the flooded banks of the Tigris.*
- *Palestine: My raid across Sinai is now 80km from the Suez Canal.*
- *Gallipoli: A very substantial TE force has built up at Mudros. I have started sending RPL down to the Gallipoli Peninsula.*

AP: I was taken aback by the scale of the CP attacks this turn. All my talk last time about Russia hanging on until I chose to retreat is feeling a little like bravado now. I might hang on, but this is a reminder that I am going to find it painful. Ivor did well to surround some units near Warsaw which I just couldn't do anything about. Given the losses of the Russians on the Eastern Front, I had to pause before sending them into attack in the Caucasus. I have spent five months building up enough force to give the Turks trouble so I was committed. These preparations are also the reason I have lost control of the situation around Lake Van as I had to neglect some areas to concentrate elsewhere. The same reason is behind my worries now for Egypt. Have I left it too weak in order to build-up against the Turkish Straights?

This game is going to be quite fluid and unpredictable in the next month or so. With Bulgarian and Italian entry looming both sides are going to be faced with distractions and opportunities which will have implications for the main fronts.

I have gained a solid victory with my Alsace attack, the most important since my gains in the East in August – September 1914. The loss of food will be a constant drain on Germany. I only continued to attack to keep up attrition on Germany. I doubt I will get an opportunity to cross the Rhine. DWK does pick out territories of great political importance and food deficit is one of the ways it does it. The Central Powers have a much lower threshold of tolerance of enemy forces within their territories than the Entente does (speaking very generally). The cities and food in the German parts of Alsace-Lorraine add up to a major French objective. They are well protected by terrain and the trench lines but the German defences in southern Alsace were just too weak. Rough terrain helps a lot, but only if there are SPs as well.