

## Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT67: 15 – 18 May 1915 (May 4)

### General Situation

In mid-May, the war seemed to have reverted to its original and (many considered) proper form. Not since September 1914 had the fronts been so fluid.

Historians have subsequently noted that commanders in the First World War were, for all their commitment to tenacious defence, quite open in the right circumstances to a strategic retreat. In Balkans, there had been little that was voluntary in the Serbian retreat. The Bulgarian intervention had unhinged the defence of Serbia. Nevertheless, it was the choice of the Serbians to refuse to fight to the end on their own territory. Escape into Albania and Greece was the same tactic which had nearly, but not quite, led to the Belgians abandoning their soil.

The Russians would have a lot further to go if they were to abandon their homeland but abandoning Poland was not quite in the same league even if the loss of Warsaw was a severe blow to Tsarist morale and prestige.

Even the Germans were capable of pulling back. They had given up Upper Alsace for pragmatic political reasons as much as military. Now in the Champagne they pulled back towards Reims to delay the French offensive and to fight on what they deemed to be better lines. Although holding French territory was valuable it did not mean every inch of it had to be held come what may.

### The Western Front



Figure 1: The French advance in Eastern Champagne as the Germans fall back towards Reims, 15 - 18 May 1915.

The Germans had before executed a withdrawal to forestall an Allied attack but the retreat in Champagne was unique in that the French were only hours from starting their attack. The French

moved forwards on 17 May on the front of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies as intended. However, the 6<sup>th</sup> Army also sent the 53<sup>rd</sup> Reserve Division forward to Verzy (5-3.1516) after prisoners had declared for a certainty that the German 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was pulling back to Reims. By 18 May, the 4<sup>th</sup> Army had moved forward through Chalons-sur-Marne and as far as Suippes (5-3.1616). This failed to impress Joffre who demanded more rapid movements. The 4<sup>th</sup> Army was however, cautious because Sarrail's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army had been held up by action on its right flank where colonial troops were forced to engage elements of the German 17<sup>th</sup> Army at Séchault (5-3.1815). While, this battle took place Sarrail managed to feed XIX Corps past the German resistance and into open country reaching Mont Blanc<sup>1</sup> (5-3.1716) by nightfall on the second day of the offensive.

Simultaneously with the new French offensive in the Champagne, the offensive in Artois was resumed after two days during which the Allies had repositioned their guns and moved fresh formations into the battle line. The Allied objective was now to break through the *Kluck Stellung* (5-3.0909) that had stopped their last assaults. The Germans had not been idle, however, and had rushed reserves there which were ready for the all too predictable Allied attacks. Whereas the capture of the Beaumetz salient on 14 May had been an appreciable success, the attacks on 17 – 18 May resulted in huge Allied losses of which the French had a tragic share. The defenders of the BEF's reputation have always pointed to the significant German losses in this continuation of this battle and it is correct they had to pay heavily to hold their position and the German 16<sup>th</sup> Division was exhausted by this effort. However, the pictures of the Allied casualties piled up in front of the *Kluck Stellung* which were scandalously published in some American newspapers shocked anyone who saw them at the time and ever since. The reality of the war could not be hidden as battle succeeded battle month after month.

### **The Italian Front**

It was avalanche season in the Italian Alps. Despite this, on both sides of the frontier, there were many young men out in the mountains with maps making notes of routes and positions. Quite a number crossed the frontier both ways and often ended up being arrested as spies (which not infrequently they were).

In the valley of the Isonzo, the spies did not need to cross the frontier for the hills on either side of the river gave good vantage points to view the preparations on the other side which were frequently carried out in plain view. The Austrians had entrenched the whole right bank of the river right down to the sea which had been exciting Italian protests to no effect for months.

### **The Eastern Front**

The pleasant spring days in southern Poland and Galicia were ideal for long marches. The Austro-Hungarian Armies supported by the German 12<sup>th</sup> Army now headed towards Lemberg and the Bug River where the Russians were expected to make a stand. The Russian cavalry which had tried to slow the initial advances was now infrequently seen. The movement of the Armies was through towns and villages which had been somewhat depopulated by the war but there was usually a crowd of old folks and children to cheer the soldiers as they went past. That they had done the same for the Russians (unsure who they were) could not be regarded as blameworthy.

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously not the high mountain in the Alps, but the small town in Champagne.

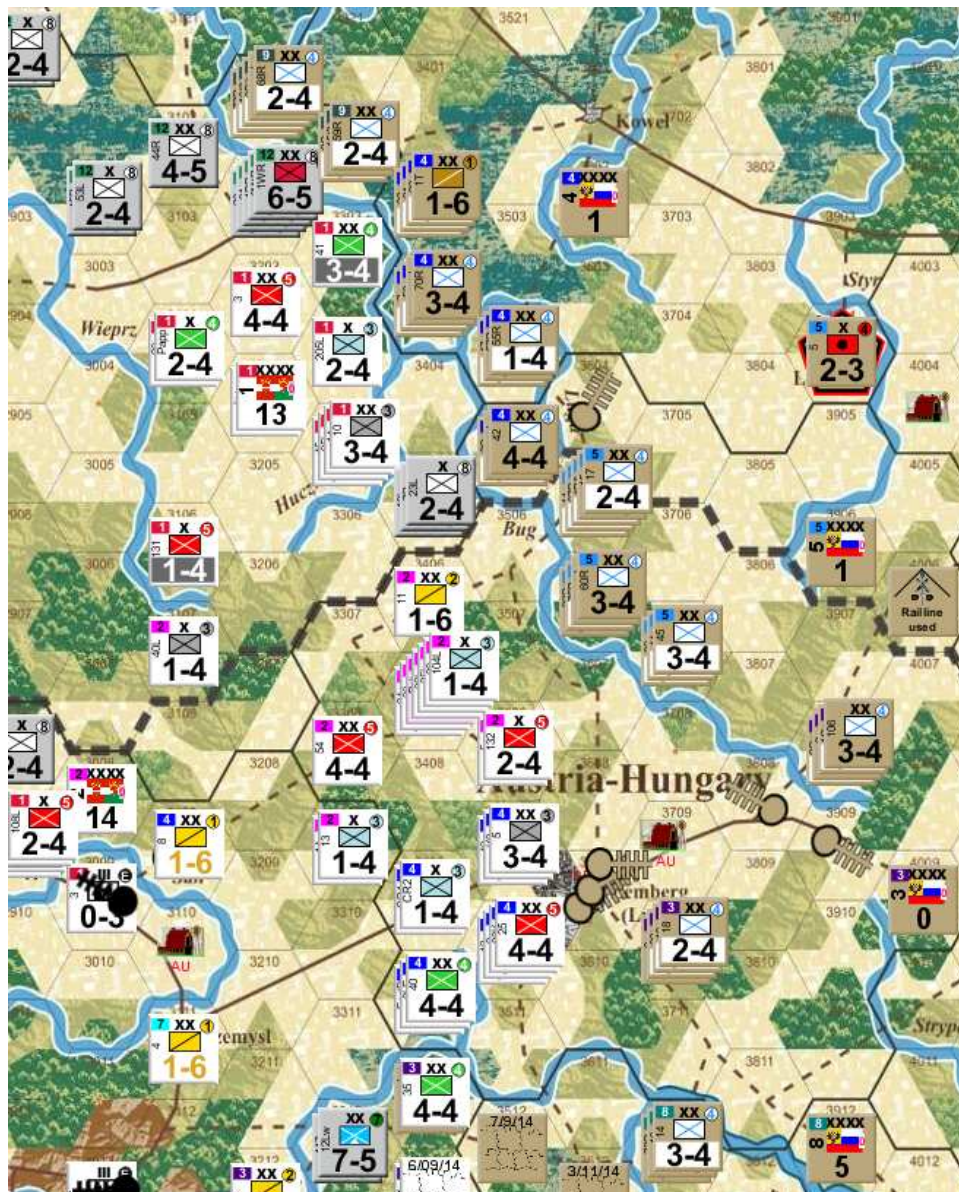


Figure 2: The Central Powers approach the River Bug and Lemberg, 15 - 18 May 1915.

The Russians indeed planned to defend the line of the Bug from Brest-Litovsk and above. This position was defended by three Russian Armies on 18 May (9<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>). Lemberg was, however, considered indefensible by the Russian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army which was evacuating that city on the same day.

The situation north of Brest-Litovsk was similar in that the Russian 10<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Armies were retreating in the gap between Brest and Grodno. The German 15<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Armies were following and there were further clashes between rapidly advancing German columns and the Russian cavalry. With the roads often blocked by huge numbers of straggling infantry, the cavalry had to rely on their cross-country capabilities to avoid being immobilized in traffic jams.

The Russian fortress cities of Grodno and Kovno were still protected by strong infantry forces, but the Germans moved artillery rapidly forwards to strike at the fortress of Olita on 16 May. Within a day, the German guns had done enough damage to persuade the garrison commander that the game was up and that same evening all the Russians in Olita left by the eastern gate and no further resistance would be offered to the Germans there.



On the far left of the German line, the German 10<sup>th</sup> Army was moving further north into Lithuania. The weight of this force was on the right to stay in contact with the German 8<sup>th</sup> Army which was moving East. This meant that towards the Baltic Coast, the German forces were relatively weak and within a gap of over 100 kilometres only one German Division (86<sup>th</sup>) was present.

The 86<sup>th</sup> was not at full strength and was a newly created formation made up of the Marienburg fortress troops and conscripts. On 17 May it was 50 kilometres northeast of the German border marching along the side of a small lake hoping to reach Varniai (4-5N.0913) by nightfall. The Germans had no cavalry for reconnaissance and they had not detected a shift of the Russian 1<sup>st</sup> Army to the northwest in the previous days. Litvinov, the Russian commander had spotted the isolation of the German column and sent the Tblisi Cossack Division forward. By noon, they were appearing in the rear of the German unit and started closing in. Four other Russian Divisions appeared a couple of hours later blocking any further forward progress. The situation of the unfortunate German formation was made worse by the fact that they were crossing a grassy plain with little cover when they were caught and there was no sense in making a fight of it while the nearest assistance was three days away. Every German realised they had walked into a trap and, after a few token volleys for honour, weapons were dropped and the unit walked meekly into captivity in perfect order. Needless to say, Litvinov was hailed as a strategic genius in St Petersburg and generously decorated, as was the Cossack Khan who had led the cavalry.



Figure 3: The advance of the German 10<sup>th</sup> Army and the surrender at Varniai, 15 – 17 May 1915.

### The Balkans

The Serbian Army was now falling back into the last corners of free Serbian territory. This withdrawal was punctuated by fierce fighting mainly on their south eastern flank where the Bulgarians continued to try and work their way into the Serbian rear. Bulgarian cavalry took the opportunity to occupy Monastir on 16 May closing the rail line to Greece from that town.

Further north, the Bulgarians suffered another sharp rebuff when they were sent into action against four Serbian regiments holding wooded ridges overlooking the cross-roads of Murgășevo (7-6.1211)

on 16 May. The Serbians had lost none of their toughness during the retreat and were not merciful in any action against the Bulgarians who were guilty of the highest treachery in their eyes.

### The Near East

At the Dardanelles, both sides succumbed to exhaustion after their recent heroics. The Allies needed to find replacements for their depleted ranks. The Turks had fresh troops arriving all the time from Istanbul and they reinforced Kemal's command at the far end of the peninsula. The Turkish defences were as soon as strong as they had ever been and it would be hard for the Allies to claim they had made much progress in the past fortnight despite their sacrifices.

In Syria and Lebanon, the Turks were revising their harsh policies of internal control which had characterised the first months of the war. Djemal Pasha had instituted a new "light hand" policy and was seeking to impress the Arabs with his trust in their loyalty. Garrisons across the region were reduced to release troops for the front.

### May 1915 DM Summary

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	3	12	15				11	41	771	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	_*	-				-	-	347	Good - *Przemysl re-captured
Ottoman	2	-	3	-				-	5	23	Good
Bulgaria	-	1	1	3				-	5	9	Good
Central Powers	2	4	16	18					51	1140	
France	1	-	3	7				-	11	598	Good
Great Britain	2	-	11	10				-	23	106	Good
Russia	-	78*	4	6				NA	88	504	Good - *Warsaw and Lublin lost
Italy	-	-	-	-				-	-	-	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-				NA	-	(95)	NA
Serbia	_*	(1)	(1)	(1)				NA	(3)	(25)	NA - *Skopje lost
Entente	3	78	18	23				-	122	1202	

### Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Russia is still fighting an extremely effective delaying action; although the odd crack is appearing. In the previous few days I managed to isolate one of his Cavalry divisions and*

*force its surrender. I have also been able to bring several artillery regiments up to the Olitsa fortifications which I will start to bombard. The German armies of the east are advancing very steadily and Sud Armee has gathered two corps of mountain divisions to assist the AH in the Carpathians.*

- *Galicja: The AH 4<sup>th</sup> Army advances into the western outskirts of Lemberg. There is no offensive action by AH but the turning movement around Lemberg is being well effected.*
- *Serbia: Another plod forward by AH forces. Bulgaria has taken some punishment but attacks again regardless. It is a race to cut across the Serbs' line of retreat into Greece.*
- *West: I took heavy punishment at Arras but cannot afford to relinquish this position. I lost a division and a half in the Arras battle so have to reinforce. There is also strong intelligence suggesting an imminent attack on my salient at Chalons-sur-Marne. I opt to withdraw from my positions along the Marne in this vicinity. They are thinly held. I withdraw to a shorter line and anchor myself on Reims.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: After repulsing another combined attack in my southernmost trenches – but for the loss of a division's worth of troops – I reinforce this position with another fresh division.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

*AP: In the last few turns I have been shocked at how powerful the Central Powers' forces were on the Eastern Front. I am aware of the Grave Threat Line as a refuge but I do not think the Russians would want to retreat all the way back there as it would be better to stop the enemy offensive further west. That might deprive the Central Powers of food and ensure they had less ground to trade against Russian offensives later in the war. In any event, I want to keep the war with Austria going even if disengagement with Germany might be a relief.*

*Until last turn I thought I would not be able to contain the Central Powers' and I would be driven all the way back to the GTL and perhaps lose Riga to boot. Now things are looking up. The key to it is that as the Central Powers move east they lose lateral railway mobility and are forced to spread out. The weakest German front was in western Lithuania and this gave me an opportunity to counterattack this turn. This should slow the Germans down next turn. The Central Powers will also be forced to concentrate to pass Brest and the Bug line. This will inevitably slow their momentum elsewhere.*

*The Russians are aided by offensives on the Western Front and (more remotely) at the Dardanelles. This must encourage the Central Powers' to curtail their operations in the East sooner or later. The second Allied attack near Arras suffered 14 hits which are pretty bad for one combat but I can afford it so long as I am steadily wearing down the Germans. Over two turns, the Arras attack has unleashed 166 combat strength points at -1 (with air support) and -2 drm. The Germans got to fire back with approximately 140 combat strength points with no modifiers. I spent 32 British and 12 French supply to inflict 19 losses on the Germans. My new French offensive in Champagne is on top of this.*