

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT68: 19 – 22 May 1915 (May 5)

General Situation

The *Fröhliche Mai* of 1915 was capped with the liberation of Lemberg on 19 May by the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army. When the news was announced crowds rushed onto the streets of not just Vienna and Budapest but also Prague, Zagreb, and Krakow. This was considered a great display of Hapsburg unity and Imperial patriotism. Only in Sarajevo did the Governor have to report that there was no enthusiasm for the victory.

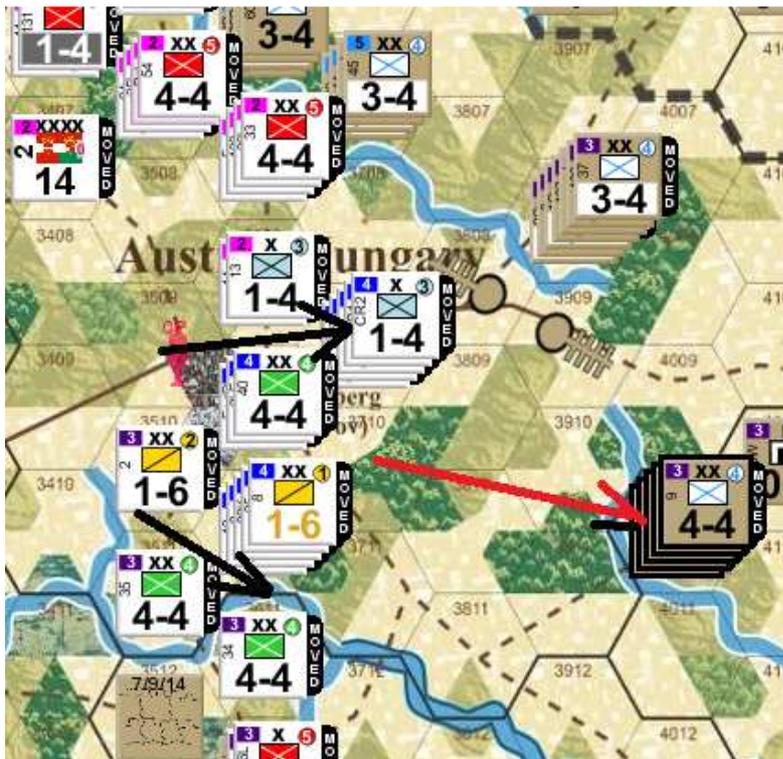


Figure 1: The Austrians liberate Lemberg, 19 May 1915.

In Russia, by contrast, it was a bad time to be a senior officer. They were getting dismissed at a rapid rate. It began to be suggested in several quarters, both military and civilian, that perhaps the Tsar should take command of the Army and rally it. The initial response to this idea was an example of tactless Court behaviour. One of the Tsar's private secretaries sent a note to the Minister of Defence, the Grand-Duke, and STAVKA assuring them that the Tsar had confidence in the Army command despite the losses of Lodz and Warsaw. The note went on to say that the position would be reconsidered if a third major city such as Vilna or Riga were lost.¹ The secretary rather plainly put a precise limit on the map of the extent of the Tsar's confidence in the Army and undermined any who thought there should be no further retreats.

¹ This note was clearly the source of the strategic card "Tsar Takes Command" in Ted Raicer's classic WWI game, *Paths of Glory*. Some wargamers do not realise how minutely researched historical games are.

The Western Front

The Anglo-French offensive in Artois had ended by 19 May. The main German line was still securely founded on the *Kluck Stellung*. The German 1st Army (no longer commanded by von Kluck) gave Falkenhayn a favourable report suggesting they had defeated the attack and did not make much of the loss of the Beaumetz position (5-3.0909) early in the battle. Casualty returns on both sides were sobering but not unprecedented.

The French offensive in Champagne was not yet over. A German counterattack on 20 May at Verzy (5-3.1516) drove the French back from the southern approaches to Reims. However, the French 6th Army moved forward in strength in the following two days and the Germans settled down to defend the historic French city. Joffre refused to allow an attack so the two sides had to stare at each other while they waited for developments elsewhere.

The main action now was in the region of Dormois in the Upper Aisne (5-3.1815) which Sarrail's 3rd Army contested with the German 17th Army, part of the Crown Prince's Army Group. The Germans had well positioned entrenchments often concealed in woods. The most notable aspect of this combat was that the French had concentrated three brigades of heavy guns to support their attacks which were in continuous action on 21 and 22 May. However, observation for the guns was difficult and they were insufficient to break up the very effective defence of the German 10th Division. The French were forced to pay a very heavy price for every step forwards.



Figure 2: The action at Verzy and in the Dormois, 19 - 22 May 1915

The Italian Front

In Rome, it was now known in restricted circles that the mobilisation orders were no mere precautionary exercise but that the government was intent on declaring war. To be more correct, half the government had that intention but in the next few days it would be difficult for those who thought this course might be misguided to make this argument without appearing unpatriotic.

The Eastern Front

After the recapture of Lemberg, the Austrian and German Armies came to a halt in front of what were apparently strong Russian defences along the River Bug, south of Brest-Litovsk. It was necessary to take some rest and undertake some preparation. Some Austro-Hungarian units had already marched more than 250 kilometres from the Wisloka River to Lemberg. Further south, the front was still moving eastwards. The Austrian 3rd Army had now activated and had penetrated into the upper Dniestr region as the Russian positions in the Carpathians were outflanked and progressively forced to withdraw.

The Russians had also been forced to make some further retreats in Eastern Poland. The German 9th Army had occupied Bialystok on 19 May. The German 15th Army had approached Brest-Litovsk and, on 20 May, defeated the Russian 3rd Guards and 1st Siberian Divisions which had made a stand at Kamyanets (4-5.3116) in an unsuccessful attempt to contest a crossing of the Lyasnaya River. This caused the garrison commander of Brest-Litovsk to panic. An accidental explosion in the main magazine resulted in the fortress being abandoned on 22 May while the Russian 9th and 10th Armies refused to accept responsibility for defending either the city or the fort.

The Russians were also burning their stores at Kovno, but for the present the Germans had not reached either Kovno or its sister fortress at Grodno. The German 10th and 8th Armies had approached close to these places of resistance, but there had as yet been no attack. In part this was due to the German response to the surrender of Varniai (4-5N.0913). This had caused the 10th Army to send four infantry Divisions to hunt down the Russians responsible. They found some of the Russians at Vaiguva (4-5N.1012) on 20 May and forced them into further retreats.

Ludendorff was not happy with this marching and counter-marching and angrily ordered the 10th Army to focus on a proper objective. The reason why Ludendorff was so short tempered was because on 20 May the Kaiser had asked if he might visit Memel (having been told it was secure). It was the Kaiser's idea to arrive there in his Royal Yacht. Then, on 21 May, the Russian Guards Cavalry Division rode into the Baltic Port once more, though they only stayed a few hours. The situation beyond the Prussian border was unsettled and allowed this kind of embarrassment which wholly contradicted the belief in Germany that the Russians were defeated. Falkenhayn visited OberOst at this time and warned Ludendorff that the Russian retreat might be tactical and that in no circumstances would a deep penetration of Russian territory be justified.

The Balkans

The Bulgarian pursuit of the Serbian Army was unremitting. Every few days the retreating Serbians were forced to stop and hold off yet another attack of their pursuers. On 20 May, this scenario repeated itself at Dolenci (7-6.1112).

The Serbians had been retreating for three months so were very tired and depleted compared with the force that had abandoned Belgrade in February. Nevertheless, as they crossed the Plačenta Massif before descending the road to Lake Ohrid, the Belgrade Garrison Brigade still kept its proper military formation. Its commander, later an inter-war prime minister of Yugoslavia, described in his memoirs an odd scene on the road near Ohrid (7-6.1012). An American missionary had set up a first

aid station and was handing our food and water to the footsore soldiers. The missionary also had a small gospel choir singing over and over again the spiritual “Just Let My People Go” which mesmerised the uncomprehending Serbians who sat listening to it for several hours before they had to resume their march.

The Near East

The correspondent of *The London Times* left Basra on 21 May *en route* to East Africa. He had despaired that there would be any story to dispatch from the Mesopotamian front since his arrival a few weeks previously. The oppressive climate was also tormenting him. He succumbed to malaria on the voyage to Mombassa and the only lines he had in *The Times* was his obituary which appeared some days later.

The Russians had an opportunity for action on the Caucasus Front when they received intelligence of a Kurdish cavalry encampment located on a cliff overlooking the Murat River (6-8.2920). A plan was conceived to surprise this force which was distracted by a demonstration of the 4th Caucasus Cavalry Division on the opposite side of the river. Meanwhile a large Russian concentration including the 1st Finnish Division was marched across the western flanks of Mount Sufian in order to arrive on the Kurd’s flank on 22 May. This coincided with an attempt by the Kurds to take on the Cossacks who had imprudently crossed the river and were driven back in a colourful swashbuckling sword fight which owed nothing to the 20th Century. When the Kurds returned with the booty of the sacked Cossack camp they discovered that they had been tricked by a feigned retreat and their own baggage was now in the possession of the Finns. The Kurds then destroyed themselves in a hopeless attempt to recover their camp.



Figure 3: The Russian attack on the Kurdish camp at the Murat Cliff, 22 May 1915.

May 1915 DM Summary

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	3	12	15	7			11	48	778	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	-*	-	-**			-	-	347	Good - *Przemysl re-captured, **Lemberg re-captured.
Ottoman	2	-	3	-	2			-	7	25	Good
Bulgaria	-	1	1	3	2			-	7	11	Good
Central Powers	2	4	16	18	11				62	1140	
France	1	-	3	7	8			-	19	606	Good
Great Britain	2	-	11	10	-			-	23	106	Good
Russia	-	78*	4	6	6**			NA	94	510	Good - *Warsaw and Lublin lost, Bialystok lost
Italy	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	-	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-			NA	-	(95)	NA
Serbia	-*	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)			NA	(4)	(26)	NA - *Skopje lost
Entente	3	78	18	23	14			-	136	1216	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: I am being drawn ever deeper into Russia and it becomes dangerous. Careless advances cost me an understrength Reserve division being cut off and forced to surrender in the Baltics. The Bear still has claws. Also, with most of my units having a movement rate of 5 before forced marches and my HQs having only 4 and no forced march capability, I am starting to outrun my supply. Several aspirational attacks had to be cancelled due to failure in supply. I still launch several small attacks; but they are disparate and more opportunistic than part of a greater plan.*
- *Galicia: The AH 4th Army recovers Lemberg and commences the turning manoeuvre around the Dniester. The German Sud Armee is now entering the western Carpathians and should soon be in a position to support.*
- *Serbia: Bulgaria seizes its first real opportunity for a meaningful attack at the headwaters of the Cuxna River. Montenegro has now also been fully cleared of enemy troops.*
- *West: I took more punishment at Arras and also west of Verdun. Both positions held, however, and I am forced once again to feed reserves into these locations from other*

areas of the front. Strengthening one location means weakening another at this point. The tempo is being entirely set by Robert on the WF.

- *Caucasus: Quiet; although I sense an impending offensive west of Lake Van.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet. I move out of Al-Amarah back up the Tigris. I am deep in the marshlands and feel discomfited by it.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet. I reinforce the forward trenches. He will not attack again this month, I suspect.*
- *Italy: Quiet. The success in Serbia and lack of recent casualties against Russia have allowed me to slowly build up a strong defensive line along the Isonzo. Three more Mt brigades have been released from operations against Montenegro to move to the borders with Italy. The stab in the back is imminent.*

AP: I considered halting both my attacks in the West this turn as I have probably already had the best of it. In the end, I kept going in Champagne as I want to elevate German losses and force them to strengthen the defences in the West (and weaken them elsewhere).

The Russians are not retreating everywhere. I see Russian DM as a resource to be used by the Entente so even when their losses are mounting on the Eastern Front I am prepared to make an attack on the Turks.

In favourable locations, I am willing to challenge the Central Powers to make an attack where I can fight on more even terms. The Germans in Lithuania are being presented with a dilemma as to whether to go north or east as they cannot easily do both at the same time. I am avoiding a repeat of the bombardment of Olita last turn which was costly to me by abandoning threatened forts (Brest and Kovno). The Austrians have had an easy time lately so it will be interesting to see whether they can stomach some fights on the Bug and in Eastern Galicia when Italy is about to show its hand.