

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT78: 1 – 5 July 1915 (July 1)

General Situation

As the war approached its first anniversary, both sides were more and more willing to use any expedient to gain an advantage. Any objective reading of history would demonstrate that by the summer of 1915 both sides were investigating the use of chemical weapons but the Germans had the most advanced chemical industry in Europe and it was therefore unsurprising that they were quicker to come up with some realistic capabilities. 1 July 1915 is notorious because on that date, the German Army opened the so called Gaswerke of Hirson. This became the depot for the assembly of gas weapons and gas defence equipment for the Western Front.



Figure 1: The infamous and sinister Gaswerke of Hirson, July 1915.

At this stage of the war, German strategy had not yet been reduced to the exercise of brute force in ever greater extremes. At the beginning of July 1915, there was a serious effort to prise the Russians from the Entente camp. Falkenhayn was closely associated with this. Both prior to and during World War One many senior German military leaders had speculated that Russia was something of a “Sleeping Giant”. They understood that deep penetration into Russian territory would probably trigger a psychological response among Russians that would lead them to drastically increase efforts to resist. Hindenburg also shared some of this perspective and was now questioning how wise further advances would be. The lessons of Napoleon’s campaigns were not lost on these leaders.

Against this background the Tsar was becoming increasingly desperate. In his mind, the Central Powers were threatening to destroy the Russian Army and further retreats might lead to demands for a more popular government and different war leadership. Although much of the correspondence disappeared in the unsettled post-war era, it is known without doubt that the Tsar’s emissaries were in contact with both the German Army and representatives of the United States’ government in early July 1915. There was for nearly a week a dialogue in which it appears the Germans offered to restrict the limits of their advances so long that the Russians dropped out of the war. The future of Poland would, it was proposed await a peace conference after the defeat of the Western Allies.

The affair of the July Letters was undoubtedly a turning point in the war. The Tsarist regime backed away from a peace deal as it realised that it could not count on any German goodwill in future negotiations. Nevertheless, enormous damage was done when the Germans published some selected documents which left few statesmen in any doubt that some serious discussions had taken place. This had a bad effect on the morale of the Russian Army which understood their leaders had

no confidence in victory. The Western Powers were even more shocked at this demonstration of weakness in their ally. Thereafter no one in the West trusted the Russians or more particularly the Tsar. The British government went so far as to discretely curtail some of the credit they had offered the Russians. Thereafter they ensured that American purchases were more directed to the growing needs of their own armed forces.

The Western Front



Figure 2: The climax of the Western Champagne Offensive, 1 - 5 July 1915.

The situation on the Eastern Front, forced Joffre to give up all further reservations he had about supporting Foch's current offensive in Western Champagne. After the initial fighting around Neuilly St-Front (4-5.1215) on 25 – 26 June, the Germans had been steadily strengthening their defences and they had negated many of the small territorial gains made in the first attacks. The German 3rd Army had also concentrated considerable numbers of guns in this sector which had been exchanging deadly fire with the French artillery over several days.

Foch determined that he had to attack in greater strength if he was to break the German line. Under cover of the artillery bombardments, the French 9th and 6th Armies were reinforced and the French Air Force made its most intensive efforts of the war to date. A culminating attack was planned for 3 July and troops were given orders to advance over a front extending more than 20 kilometres, defended by four German Divisions (from west to east, 22nd, 38th, 3rd Bavarian and 3rd). Not only was this the largest artillery and air operation of the war so far, the French committed more infantry to a single attack than in any previous action. There was considerable reliance on colonial and North African troops. The 3rd Senegalese Brigade was given the objective to capture a farm complex known as Les Maisons Blanches which had held out against the best efforts of the French IV Corps on 26 June.

The French bombardment on 3 July was of unprecedented ferocity in the hour before the infantry were unleashed. While the French advanced cautiously, the power of the guns inspired some confidence in the assault groups and forced the Germans to keep their heads down. The German

guns were also soon in action attempting to catch the second wave in the open and supporting German counterattacks. Success and failure were evenly distributed. The German defences were just too strong to be overcome in a single effort and in many places the French losses were extremely heavy. However, there was enough success to tempt Foch into redoubling his efforts during the next two days.

On the German side there was concern at the scale of the French attacks but it was soon apparent that the defence would outlast the attack and it was only a matter of holding on before the French had become unable to continue. Les Maisons Blanches were reduced to a chalky smear on the landscape as seven attacks and counterattacks passed across the ruins of the farm. After the war, in 1923, it was rebuilt and one outer wall of each building was painted black in memory of those who fell near there, particularly the Senegalese.

The Italian Front



Figure 3: The Italian 4th Army forces the Passo Pordoi, 4 July 1915.

At the head of the Passo Pordoi (6-4.2515), the Austrian 56th Mountain Brigade was in a dire situation by 3 July. Although large numbers of additional Hapsburg troops were on their way to reinforce the Army of Tyrol, none had reached this remote location in the Dolomites. In contrast, the Italian 4th Army had a rail link as far as Belluno (6-4.1517) along which supplies were arriving and the fresh 30th Division was thrown into a new attack over the pass on 4 July. Within hours the Austrian defence collapsed and next day there were reports of Italians occupying Corvara-in-Badia (6-4.1515). From there the Italians had an open road west toward the critical Bozen-Innsbruck railway about 43 kilometres distant.

The Eastern Front

While the Tsar was reaching out to the Germans so disastrously, the war on the Eastern Front had hardly abated. The heaviest fighting was part of what was already being referred to as the Battle of Riga. The situation of the Russians there was quite critical. The Russian 1st Army was in danger of

being cut off south of Riga and was depending on the Russian 12th Army to prevent the Germans advancing into the city from the south east.



Figure 4: The Battle of Riga, 1 - 5 July 1915.

The German 10th Army, with some support from the German 11th Army, had put its strength into its right wing and had, between 1 – 3 July, fought its way forwards from Vecumnieki to Baldone and was threatening to advance to Kerkava (4-5N.1405) the last town before the city outskirts. By 4 July, the Germans were running short of ammunition and were forced to pause for forty eight hours during which time the evacuation of the Russians continued. Even so, there were still nine Russian Divisions south and west of Riga at nightfall on 5 July. Litvinov, commanding the 1st Army, was reputed to have collapsed with anxiety when he heard the 12th Army was withdrawing across the Dvina River, east of Riga.

In Volhynia, Podolia and Bukhovina the forward momentum of the Central Powers' armies carried them toward Czernowitz which the Russians were abandoning on 4 July. Rovno fell to the combined forces of the Austro-Hungarian 1st Army and the German 12th Army on 1 July. Perhaps the boldest operation conceived at this time was a joint advance of the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army supported by the AlpenKorps which was initiated following intelligence that the Russian 3rd Army headquarters was at Kamenietsky (5-6S.0103), a crossing of the Southern Bug. The AlpenKorps staff believed they could push through Proskurow and take this headquarters by surprise as there seemed to be few organised Russian forces in the way. Unfortunately, on 3 July a message reached the AlpenKorps from Hindenburg that cancelled the operation and insisted that no troops should enter Proskurow. To comply with this order some had to turn around from Proskurow (which they had occupied) and fall back to a line designated by Hindenburg some 20 kilometres further west. Thus the influence of the possibility of peace with the Russians had a direct impact on the campaign.

This was also the case in Belorussia. There the German 8th and 9th Armies were advancing on a narrow front to the south west of Minsk, which city lay about 63 kilometres east of their spearheads on 2 July. On that day, the 8th Army responded to a request for assistance from the 9th Army in

clearing a Russian force out of marshy country (4-5E.0313) that lay between the main bodies of the two Armies. This proved more difficult than expected for the Russians did not allow themselves to be pinned down and were in fact manoeuvring forwards while additional Russian units were coming in to position holding the two German Armies apart.



Figure 5: The German 8th Army advance near Minsk gets into difficulty, 1 – 5 July 1915.

This was part of a wider operation of the Russian 7th Army. The commander of this force, the chain-smoking General Nikitin, wanted no part of the Tsar's peace feelers and had just been reinforced with three new Grenadier Divisions (4th – 6th Grenadiers) and was therefore confident that he could keep the Germans out of Minsk and in fact drive them further away. The Russians that the Germans had fought on 2 July were mainly veterans of the 28th Division and they had moved further into the gap which existed between to enemy Armies by 4 July. However, there was also action to the north where the Germans had left themselves vulnerable to another flanking move along the main railway line from Minsk to Warsaw. Four understrength, but determined, Russian Infantry Divisions and the 1st Turkestan Cossack Division moved forwards rapidly bypassing the German 41st and 87th Divisions in the marshes and headed for the rear of the 8th Army.

On the morning of 5 July, Nikitin was issuing his final orders when the Tsar's Russo-Irish aide-de-camp Colonel-Baron Vladimir Padraig Mulligan appeared suddenly at his headquarters. Mulligan had been flown from the Tsar's headquarters near Mogilev and, armed with full Imperial authority, ordered Nikitin to cancel all offensive operations in case they prejudiced the peace which the Tsar had thought was in his grasp. Nikitin had no option but to submit and the Cossacks were recalled.

Nikitin and Mulligan spent the rest of the day arguing about what they had just done fuelled by spirits and smokes. Meanwhile, the teetotal Tsar was beginning to have his doubts as he had received no cousinly messages from the Kaiser and opponents of compromise were starting to show their distaste at the possibility of giving up. If Nikitin had made his move a couple of days later no one would have stopped him.

The Balkans

The main action in the Balkans at the beginning of July was along the Adriatic coast. The Italians were unloading their expeditionary force at Valona. Further north, the Austro-Hungarian 6th Army was withdrawing from the Balkans via Cattaro. The Austrian Navy had a base there which was used by submarines and a flotilla of destroyers. On 2 July, every ship available was used to assist the transport of the 4th and 16th Croat Mountain Brigades across the bay to the railhead at Castelnuova (7-6.1020). Interestingly, one of the naval vessels used was commanded by Captain von Trapp who later found fame as a prominent opponent of the Anschluss of 1938. His commanding Admiral then protested to the 6th Army staff that further transfers of ground forces to Castelnuova would not be conducted as they were prejudicial to the Navy's separate operations and was draining fuel supplies at an unsustainable rate. According to this decree, the rest of 6th Army would have to walk to Castelnuova which, given the configuration of the coast, was normally more than five days march for any ordinary infantry unit.

The Near East

Despite the heat of mid-summer there were unmistakable signs of preparations of a new Allied attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Out on the blue sea, battleships loitered menacingly and fired a few ranging shots. The Turkish defences were fully manned. There were altogether ten Turkish Divisions on the peninsula, all but two of which were in close contact with the Allied forces.

On 5 July, the 2nd Australian Division detrained in Port Said after transfer from Suez. This unit doubled the commitment of the Australians to the conflict. Nobody in the 2nd Australian yet knew for sure whether they would go to join their compatriots at Gallipoli (as they hoped) or instead go to France.

The Turkish 6th Army continued to advance between Kut and Ali Gharbi. The I Indian Corps remained south of Ali Gharbi as Townsend tried to gauge the enemy's intentions.

The stalemate in the Caucasus seemed unbreakable. The most significant action was that the Russians reoccupied some previously abandoned positions in the Murat Valley which was a sign that they had recovered a little from the Turkish attacks during June. However, Yudenitch confessed to the staff of the Caucasus Army that it would be exceptionally difficult to get through the Turkish defences which seemed strong along all the most likely axes of advance.

DM Summary – July 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	17							11	28	850	Good
Austria-Hungary	1							-	1	400	Good
Ottoman	-							NA	-	35	Good
Bulgaria	-							-	-	11	Good
Central Powers	18							11	29	1276	
France	14							-	14	635	Good
Great Britain	-							-	-	116	Good
Russia	6							NA	6	588	Good - *Rovno lost
Italy	-							-	-	12	Good
Belgium	-							-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-							-	-	(27)	NA
Entente	20							-	20	1348	

Player Notes

CP: *Not this time.*

AP: *This turn was associated with some continuing discussion as to whether we should revert to the original Grave Threat to Mother Russia rule. I was concerned that Ivor would not perceive this a disadvantage. It is a limitation on what the CP can do against Russia but I have surrendered enough advantage to the CP by defending too stubbornly and allowing them to get within an ace of Russian Shaken Morale which (I now realise) will seriously deplete my production.*

The fall out of this resulted in an agreement between the players that saved the Russian 3rd Army and German 8th Army HQ from situations which would have seen their elimination.

I paused before my attack in France. The attacked hex had a counterattack combat strength of 124 if fully supplied. I could have avoided this by attacking another nearby hex but this would have significantly reduced my attack combat strength as I cannot easily move around in enemy zones of control. By maintaining the attack at the same hex I was able to use 116 combat strength points having only a -1 drm (with air support). Since I had used 12 supply points for an Artillery only attack the previous turn, I removed that deficit by spending 25 supply points on infantry and 10 supply points on Artillery and complied with Rule 22-13. It is best to consider offensives as a series of linked attacks and judge the success of them as a cumulative exercise. This turn's attack was the most risky as the difference between high and low die rolls is greater the larger the attack. The risk was more

acceptable because of the even exchanges on previous turns. The West Champagne offensive results broke down as follows:

Turn	French Combat Strength and drm	French Supply spent	German Combat Strength (no drm)	German Supply spent	French Losses (DM)	German Losses (DM)
June 6	92 - 2	26	60	10	6 Inf (6)	5 Inf (5)
June 7 – Art.only	24 - 2	12	16	4	3 Art (6)	3 Art (6)
July 1	116 – 1	35	124	23	15 Inf (14)	14 Inf (14)
Total	232 (-1/-2)	71	220	37	(26)	(25)

In the last attack this turn the die split was 3/2 with the French having the better roll and reducing their DM further by committing a Senegalese unit. This is therefore a very good set of results for the attacker. Note how much more supply the French had to spend to achieve this. In strategic terms an even exchange of losses between French and Germans is not so good for the Entente, but it is acceptable if the Germans are also being engaged by the Russians and British which has been the case recently.