Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT87: 10 – 14 August 1915 (August 3)

General Situation

The extensive late-summer lull of 1915 was becoming widely recognised and was a consequence of the re-orientation of strategy on both sides. The Central Powers were shifting towards a more defensive policy. The Entente was trying to adjust to realisation that their initial strategy had failed. In fact the failure was a double one. The initial assault on the Central Powers had failed by mid-August 1914 in France and by the end of September 1914 in the East. The Entente had hoped that in 1915 they would recover, but instead the Russians had been swept out of Poland and the Serbians had lost Serbia. Despite the encouraging early successes on the Western and Italian Fronts up to July 1915, in retrospect these could now be seen to be nothing more than minor local successes all of which were due to the Central Powers' pre-occupation with the Eastern Front.

The Western Front

Figure 1: The German 2nd Army radically thins its front lines, 10 - 12 August 1915.

The German Army in the West had many proponents of defence in depth. In the German 2nd Army sector between the Oise and the Marne this policy was taken to a fairly extreme form. On 10 August, orders were given that the extensive belt of entrenchments running east from the Forêt de Compiègne (5-3.1014) as far as Neuilly St-Front (5-3.1215) should be held very lightly with strong reserves further back.

The French made no sign of being immediately aware of the new German scheme of defence but they had habitually been slow to probe weaknesses in the German line.

The Italian Front

On 11 August, the Austro-Hungarian Tyrol and 8th Armies confirmed their satisfaction with the strength of the defensive dispositions which they had commanded. Confidence was expressed in their reports that future Italian offensives would be held with little or no loss of ground. In reply, Conrad asked them to report next on the prospects of an offensive into Italy. Sooner or later the Hapsburg Empire would have to raise the stakes with the upstart Italian Kingdom and Conrad wanted to be ready for the favourable moment. In a helpful mood he secretly sent to the Austrian commanders on the Italian Front his own prior plans for an invasion of Italy, previously drafted in every year going back to 1874. He admitted that the first two or three were his juvenilia and more weight should be given to the more recent mature expressions of his art.

The Eastern Front

The extent of the Central Powers' withdrawals on the Eastern Front was becoming known in Germany where it was not easily understood how the defeat of the Russians in July should lead to retreats by the Germans in August. Ludendorff was happy to justify it to those he had to persuade. At this stage of his career he displayed what military psychologists now call "Hoffmann rationality" which is not very surprising because they were Hoffmann's ideas. Ludendorff's thesis was that it cost Germany nothing to give up a poor region of vast forests and bogs with little food and no industry. The retreat was also a challenge to the Russian Army. If it continued to skulk a safe distance from the Germans then the Western Allies would be shown that their eastern ally was a busted flush and no longer a true member of the Entente. If, however, the Russian Army attempted to close with the Germans and fulfil their obligations to their allies then the Central Powers would continue to demoralise the Russian soldiers with operations conducted closer to their railheads.

Figure 2: The Russian 5th and 9th Army advance down the Goryn River avoiding contact with the Central Powers forces around Rovno, 10 - 14 August 1915.

The political message which the Germans would spread to the Russian Army and through that to the Russian polity would be that the continuing losses of the Russians were gaining nothing for the Russian national interest and their sacrifices were aimed at protecting the war profits of English and

French merchants and financiers. German diplomats hoped that this would make Russia more susceptible to their own claims for a German led culturally idealistic European civilisation that kept its capitalist motors in subordination. In this they were not entirely correct and it was argued that they were helping internationalist socialist ideals much more.

That the German plan was working in some respects was shown by the very uncertain movements of the Russian Army in mid-August. Only in rare sectors of the Eastern Front did the two sides remain in contact. It appeared that the Russian commanders were in no hurry at all to continue the battle and the French and British governments pressed their ambassadors and liaison officers to find out how much more commitment the Russians had to the Allied cause.

The Balkans

The Serbians agreed on 12 August to provide further assistance to the British building entrenchments covering Salonika where the pace of the construction was picking up. The defensive scheme was very conservative and extended over nearly 100 kilometres. Salonika was not, in retrospect, even under that much threat. The Bulgarians were also nearly 100 kilometres distant from the city and they were not going to cross the border into Greece. It was not, however, the Bulgarians that the British Mediterranean Command was worried about. It was recognised that a German Division might get to the Greek border from Germany a lot faster than reinforcements might reach Salonika from England. That was why Salonika needed to be entrenched.

Figure 3: The works around Salonika are extended, 10 - 14 August 1915.

The Near East

The political disquiet in London about the perceived failures of the Dardanelles operation was gathering. On 14 August, Lord Kitchener was asked to investigate this on the ground and he prepared to leave for the Mediterranean.

In Iraq, the Turkish 6th Army was starting to dig in covering Kut. The British-Indian forces remained still in the vicinity of Ali Gharbi.

Two fresh Russian Divisions (2nd Grenadier and 10th) had reached the Caucasus Front in August and the Russian positions at Köprüköy (6-8.2416) did not seem to be under immediate threat. The Turks made no further effort to exploit their victory at Pasinler (6-8.2317) beyond sending out patrols to find out where the new Russian lines were.

DM Summary – August 1915

Nation	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**Food Deficit**	**Month**	**Total**	**Morale**
Germany	-	-	-					11	11	869	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	-					1	1	405	Good
Ottoman	-	1	-					-	1	40	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-					-	-	12	Good
Central Powers	-	1	-					12	13	1306	
France	-	-	-					-	-	637	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-					-	-	124	Good
Russia	-	1	-					-	1	603	Shaken
Italy	-	-	-					-	-	17	Good
Belgium	-	-	-					-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-					-	-	(28)	NA
Entente	-	1	-					-	1	1378	

Player Notes:

CP:

- *East: Further withdrawals on the EF. Some may wonder at my willingness to relinquish territory, but my aim in Russia was twofold; reduce the Russian forces and their morale to shaken and relieve the pressure off Austria to then gain the space to deal with the threat in the west. There was never a territorial imperative to my advances. There is no great advantage – that I can see – in holding ground in Russia too far forward. It does keep the Russians pinned to the GTL, but it allows them opportunity to concentrate against a long and weak front. There is no food to be gained in Russia, which might compel a CP player to hold such ground. Doing so means occupying many Russian personnel centres who in turn require feeding. It does deny Russia manpower, of course, but at the expense of my own to garrison.* [RL – Russian manpower is fixed – it does not depend on territorial holdings at all.]

- *Serbia: No change.*
- *West: I have now assimilated all the new RPLs so the front is being stiffened. I know Robert has questioned my production of so many RPLs, but I think it was necessary early on to build up as strong a defence as possible. I have started producing more artillery now for the longer haul which will start arriving after the quitter winter months. I needed mass to endure the expected summer offensives. I have also relinquished some territory between the Oise and the Marne to further shorten my frontage by over 20km and better concentrate force.*
- *Caucasus: My attack NE of Erzerum was a resounding success. The trade-off in losses was even, but he was forced to withdraw and in so doing had also to vacate the positions astride the valley on the western edge. His hold on these locations enabled him to interdict my lateral movement out of Erzerum as I had only two movement options. One directly east but this crossed alpine terrain so was impossible. NE out of Erzerum was straight into a ZOC and entrenchments, so was denied to HQs. This problem is now resolved – to my great relief.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quietly building up.*

AP*: I should no longer be surprised at withdrawals such as that done by the Germans in France. Equally, it should be no surprise that I did not rush forward to occupy the German trenches. I am trying to delay my next bloody encounter between the French and the Germans and the last thing I need is to give my opponent a chance to gas my infantry and launch a massive attack while I blunder forwards out of the protection of my trenches.*

I have to come back at Ivor's comments on the Grave Threat Line ("GTL") rule last time. I suspect his point of view is not unique to him but I strongly believe the rule should be defended and I consider it one of the lynchpins of the Campaign Game rules. I was pleased when David Schroeder backed off from a significant change to the rule.

The GTL and the Victory Conditions combine to preclude what Ivor described as an "East Front option" by which he must mean a means for the CP to win the war in the East so that either the war is won outright by the defeat of Russia or that event would make the winning of the war in the West much easier. Since I am playing the Entente here it may be thought this is special pleading, but I am convinced this is unhistorical and would lead to a less interesting game overall.

It would be a less interesting game because the CP strategy would be obvious. They would inevitably seek a quick victory over Russia because it would shut down the major secondary front (all fronts other than the Western Front are secondary in DWK). Neither would it be difficult. The Russian Army is easily outclassed by the CP mainly by major disparities in supply and morale. It is mathematically certain that the Russians will collapse at an accelerating rate if only the Germans will attack them enough. The Russians have no extra resources to draw on if they start to go down to a final defeat and without the GTL the CP would be incentivised to accelerate the destruction of a cornered Russian Army because the DM targets for economic collapse and surrender in 1915 and 1916 are lower than in later years. The CP could also surround Romania before it became belligerent and make the invasion of that country a simple task. The result of all this would be that by early – mid 1916 the CP

would have little need to spend any further effort in the East and the result of that would be that the Ottomans would be very safe (no Caucasus action) and they should be able to make the Balkan and Italian fronts extremely strong precluding any immediate danger to Austria. The game would then become a straight fight on the Western Front, possibly still in the balance, but a rather one-dimensional final showdown.

That is not historical because there was no reason why the Russian Army should allow itself to be pinned into positions in which the CP could destroy it at its leisure. What is more the morale of the Russians is low in DWK precisely because the GTL actually mandates a war which becomes politically impossible for the Russians because it never becomes a national emergency.

The potential East Front solution for the CP should really be called World War 2 because that was the experiment in which the idea of militarily overpowering Russia was tested to destruction. The situation of Stalin in 1941 before the German invasion was not incomparable to that of the Tsar in 1916. Stalin was an all-powerful autocrat but he had a lot of weaknesses too. He had murdered and imprisoned millions and destroyed as many sectors of the Soviet economy as he had promoted. He had initially played the nationalities of the Soviet empire skilfully, but by 1941 nationalists of many varieties would have hated him and the events of the Spanish civil war and the Nazi-Soviet Pact had done enormous harm to his international appeal. All that was changed by the German invasion. All Stalin's potential domestic and international opponents had to support him in the greater cause of defeating Hitler. In DWK terms, that was the result of the Germans crossing the GTL line (approximately). The Russian war effort in the 1940s would in DWK terms have seen a massive increase in war production; a massive increase in Morale (Surrender at DM 5000+); and the ability of the Russian Army to use the huge space of its territory to buy time and to overextend the enemy.

It might be objected that the Tsar would never have reaped similar political benefits if the Germans had made the same mistakes in WWI but I would not be sure about that. The thing that destroyed the Tsar politically and also the Provisional Government (which helps prove it wasn't purely a problem with Tsarism) was that they continued an offensive policy in 1916-17 when it was disputed that continuation of the war was helpful to any Russian interests. That is why the Russians have barely a quarter of the combined morale resources of the CP powers which assail them.

Returning to the WW2 example, if instead of Hitler attacking Russia in 1941, Stalin had struck first this would have been a very different conflict especially if (as is likely) the Russian attacks had failed disastrously. Then Stalin might have been politically vulnerable and the whole Allied war effort would have been compromised by the notion that they were also aggressors. In that situation Russian DM allowances wouldn't be sky high. They might have been no better than those of the Tsar.

The GTL is often misunderstood. Ivor suggested it was a refuge behind which the Russians can rebuild in a state of immunity. I would concede the GTL does give the Entente a few important advantages. First, it does prevent the CP determining the timing of the Russian defeat. That means the CP is placed in an awkward situation of not being able to gauge easily how much effort to put into the Eastern Front since if they overdo it the Russian could pull back and frustrate a fresh effort.

However, the GTL is no panacea for the Entente and it does nothing positive to help them win. Neither do the Russians ever truly recover. Their morale is only getting worse. Additional strength

points are of limited value to the Russians. Lack of supply and morale will be the true limiting factor of their operations in the mid-game.

They have to overlook the decline of morale because the Russians only help the Entente by engaging in combat with the CP nations and they cannot do this by hiding behind the GTL. They will always have to come out to have any positive effect in the game and they cannot contest the Caucasus or Romania or take advantage of the various weaknesses of Austria or any other opportunity if they are passive. Ideally the Russians should actually seek their own surrender (though preferably by spinning it out) because that makes the maximum use of their own morale (which is an Entente resource not a Russian resource) and because after Russian surrender the CP are hit by a final garrison requirement which may require them to increase resources in the East at a critical time in the late-game (this represents the demands which were placed on the CP by the actual collapse of order in the East during the early Bolshevik period).

All this will mean that the historical process by which Russian collapsed in WWI makes perfect sense. The Russians will be accomplices in their own destruction. The loss of Russia will not in itself defeat the Allied cause though the Russians will drain some significant strength from the CP. The CP will best accelerate the defeat of Russian by heavy counterstrokes after the conclusion of Russian attempts to advance against them and there will be a cat and mouse element to the final stages of the war in the East as the last dregs of Russian morale are used up.

The GTL is a refuge, but this is not its most important effect and it is not likely the Russians will make much use of it as such. It is more important as a limit to the CP's initiative on the Eastern Front and it should be seen as such unapologetically as it represents a real strategic mechanism in WWI which is the way in which limited CP objectives served to politically undermine the Russian government. If the CP player complains about this then the Entente should be entitled to call for several more maps to be drawn, and for Russian production and morale resources to be multiplied up to five times.