

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT94: 10 – 14 September 1915 (September 3)

General Situation

In the second half of 1915, there was a notable increase in the number of heavy guns deployed on the Western Front. The Germans had brought most of their larger pieces back from the Eastern Front and the British and French were now starting to benefit from the priority which had been given to this arm by manufacturers since early in the conflict. Nothing was more suitable, it was believed, for smashing the intricate systems of trenches and other fieldworks which had proliferated since the previous autumn.

The French Inspector-of-Artillery had argued in a recent paper for Marshal Joffre that more guns were needed for every sector of the front. He stated that if the number of guns were limited to what was needed for current operations then the Germans would be able to spot where they were concentrated and would prepare their defences accordingly. It was therefore argued that there should be a large surplus of artillery to bolster defences and threaten every part of the German line. In response, Joffre agreed the idea was magnificent but might not be practical. Joffre asked if there could be use of dummy concentrations of artillery but no concrete proposals taking this up during this period of the war can now be traced.

Meanwhile, the British had concentrated three Brigades of heavy guns behind their front. These were only enough for their planned attack but represented a new dimension to British firepower unprecedented in the war so far.

The Western Front

The sector chosen by Sir John French for his attack was between Loos and La Bassée (5-3.1007). This has subsequently been generally known as the Battle of Loos as the action was mainly concentrated to the south of this sector. Elements of both the 1st and 2nd Army were to be engaged but Sir John expected the 2nd Army to provide the decisive thrust through the German reserve lines. In all twelve British Divisions were held in readiness to join the initial attack or participate in the follow up action. The German defences were solidly entrenched and held by the German 16th Army, commanded by Crown-Prince Rupprecht.

By 13 September, all the artillery was in position and the bombardment began late that afternoon and continued all through the night. Altogether the British expended 6 weeks supply of shells in little more than 24 hours and they confidently expected this would neutralise many of the German positions. The Germans sheltered in their dug-outs and bunkers and expected an attack at dawn on the 14 September. After a few false alarms when the gunfire stopped and then restarted, the German infantry concluded that there might be another day of shelling. That was not to be because at 10:30am the guns stopped again. Whistles were blown in the British trenches and within seconds large numbers of British infantry were to be seen picking their way through no-man's land. The German infantry raced to their parapets and started firing.

As the two sides' trenches were often close, the British had some chance of winning this race and in some places their leading elements were able to drive hard into the German positions capturing the Aachen and Bremen Redoubts. The German 45th and 46th Reserve Divisions were at the centre of the British attack and they must be credited with a fierce resistance that inflicted grievous losses on the British infantry who could only make progress by disregarding appalling casualties. The situation was nevertheless very grim for the outnumbered German troops in the front lines. The commanders of both Reserve Divisions

independently sought permission to fall back from the Crown-Prince as they correctly understood this would be the only way to save their units from catastrophic losses. Rupprecht could countenance no retreat as he needed the British advance to be delayed long enough to allow time for the commitment of his reserves. By noon, Prince Rupprecht had alerted two other Divisions (19th Ersatz and 23rd Saxon) in close reserve that they must be ready to fight that afternoon and within two hours they were heading for the thickest part of the action.

Rupprecht's reserve struck the British I and II Corps when they were most disorganised and after they had suffered mounting losses from the German field artillery and mortar detachments which were now aiming at their own former front line. By late afternoon the action descended into a bloody melee in which no one exercised much control and this struggle continued after dark. Although the British claimed to be in possession of the two main redoubts they had captured in the morning, this was actually no longer really true. By dawn of the following day Sir John French would discover he had been given an excessively optimistic report on the previous day's action and it was hard to verify any substantial gains over any long section of the front.

Haig's 1st Army was quickest to offer an explanation for the disappointment. Its report at midnight on 15 September cited the absence of air support, the slow advance of the 2nd Army, and the orders which had prevented Haig committing his own reserve (the Canadian Division) to the battle. In this assessment, which was copied immediately to the King, 1st Army was not responsible for any aspect of the failure of the operation.



Figure 1: The Battle of Loos, 13 - 14 September 1915.

The Italian Front

Mussolini (after the war) wrote an amusing sketch of life at Cadorna's headquarters in Padua in September 1915 when the Italian war effort seemed stymied for lack of good opportunities

to strike effectively at the Austrians. According to Mussolini's unnamed source, Cadorna took a blank sheet of paper on which to sketch out the next Italian offensive and locked himself into his room for some undisturbed concentration. He emerged two days later with the same blank sheet untouched.¹

The Eastern Front

The peace in the East was often uneasy as neither side trusted the other to remain inactive for an indefinite period. The Russians were also moving forwards in some places particularly in Belorussia where the Russian 6th Army advanced up to 40 kilometres in the space of a few days with the aim of covering the railway from Minsk as far as Baranovichi (4-5E.0217). There was no opposition to this movement.

The Central Powers also appeared to be preparing operations in places. On 13 September, the Russian 10th Army was convinced that the German 15th Army was about to descend on Pinsk and hurriedly ordered an evacuation of that town. Further south, the Austrian 2nd and 4th Army had actually issued orders for another attack on the Russians at Shumsk (5-5.4405) to take place on 11 September but this was cancelled at the last moment.

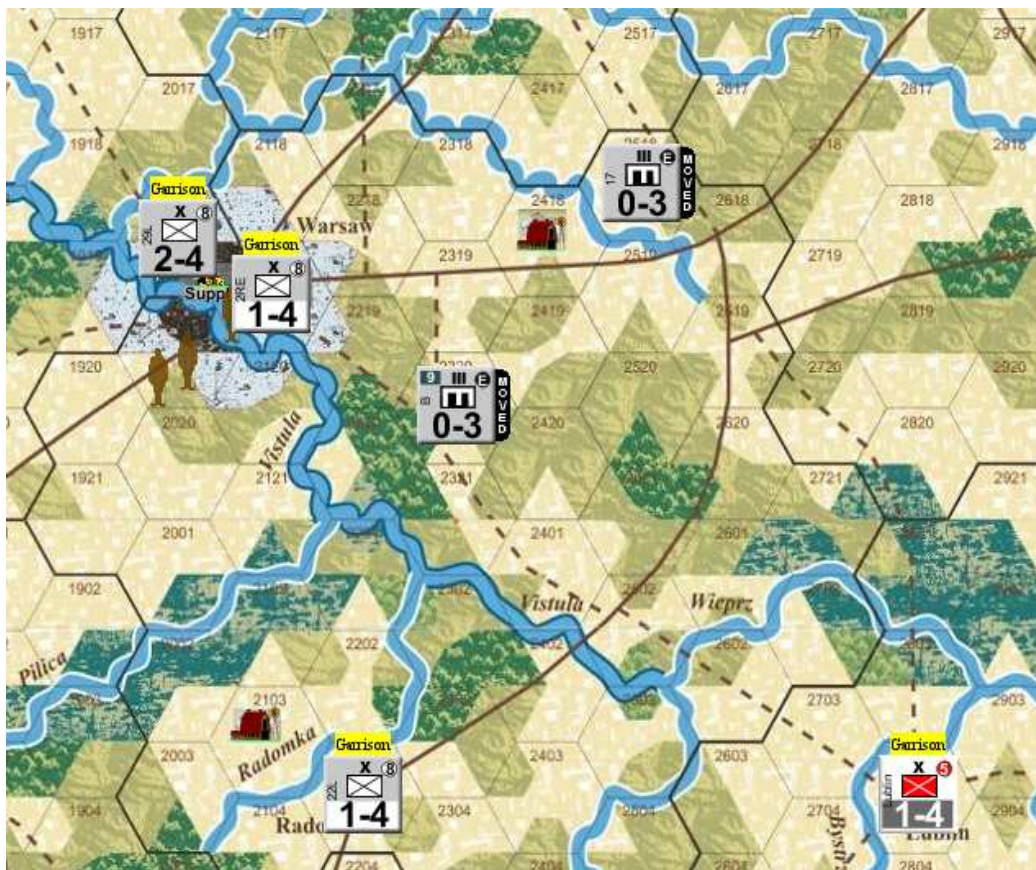


Figure 2: Garrisons in Central Poland, September 1915.

The Balkans

The Italian commander of the 14th Division had wanted to make some mark on the front in Albania and had managed to obtain the confidence of the Montenegrin Corps (Serbian 4th

¹ *Il tabula rasa di Cadorna*, La Stampa, 18 June 1919.

Corps) which was the main Serbian-Allied force covering Valona. The Italians proposed a strike north to surprise the Austrians (8th Division) located around the small centre of Kolonje (7-6.0515). Intelligence suggested the Austrians were short of supplies and were not entrenched. The Serbian 4th Corps agreed that some kind of attack was justified and this was a good opportunity.

The operation required a 25 kilometre approach march which saw the Italian and Montenegrin units intermingled on narrow swamp and forest tracks. At the end of it, the main body of the attackers crossed the Seman River during the night of 13/14 September. By dawn, the Cetinje Brigade and the Italians were in a position to move against the Austrian encampments at Kolonje. Although, the Allied movement had not been detected, the Austrians fought back effectively and managed to limit the destruction wrought by the raid. The first Montenegrin attack was repulsed and the Italians never quite got to grips with the Austrians who did not panic and presented a steady defence once they had overcome their initial surprise.



Figure 3: The Italian-Montenegrin Attack on Kolonje, 13 – 14 September 1915.

The Near East

Hamilton postponed the Australians' attack on the Triple V position (7-6.3812) which was due to take place on 13 September as the plan that was produced seemed to guarantee another massacre. The attack was not cancelled as Hamilton's staff could see no other way of breaking out. Within a few days, the Australians would have to attempt it one way or another.

In Iraq, the intense fighting in the Hai came to an end as the Lahore Division (now the 3rd Indian Division) came up from the south and stabilised the British left flank. The Turks were in any event exhausted by their recent efforts which had also brought them to within field gun range of Ali Gharbi.

The Turkish 3rd Army strengthened its left flank in response to the Russian attack at Karagöbek (6-8.2116) which had failed. Yudenitch also responded by continuing to shift his own strength westwards in an attempt to get beyond the Turkish line. As a result Russian units were for the first time operating in the Coruh Valley which had hitherto escaped the attention of the war.

DM Summary – September 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	-	10					12	22	894	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	1					-	1	414	Good
Ottoman	2	3	-					-	5	48	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-					-	-	12	Good
Central Powers	2	3	11					12	28	1348	
France	1	-	-					-	1	638	Good
Great Britain	4	1	15					-	20	148	Good
Russia	-	1	-					-	-	612	Shaken
Italy	-	-	-					-	-	19	Good
Belgium	-	-	-					-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-	(1)					-	(1)	(29)	NA
Entente	5	2	15					-	22	1414	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Quiet.*
- *Serbia: Quiet.*
- *West: Quiet.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet; although pleased that my irregular cavalry held their place in the line on my western flank. I have reinforced their position so as to deny the Russians the opportunity of turning that flank.*
- *Mesopotamia: My last attack did not come off well and cost me the loss of a division for a trifling British brigade.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

I have very little I can add to this as it is a very tricky situation. Anywhere I attack is likely to cause me greater losses than I inflict and there is no territorial gain to be made that is of any advantage. It is somewhat of a Sitzkrieg, waiting to see who blinks first.

AP: I thought about delaying my British attack for another turn, but there seemed too much risk that the Germans would see what was up and strengthen the threatened sector. A reason for more delay was for coordination with the French as they are not as ready to attack.

This is my most deliberate attack on the Western Front for some time in that there was no last minute improvisation in what I did. All the units were deliberately positioned last turn to ensure I could maximise the combat strength while trying not to be obvious about what I planned.

The British now have enough Artillery to help concentrate 99 combat strength into two hexes which enabled me to exceed the counterattack strength of 75. This used up 29 supply points as there was 16 Artillery SP involved. If I chose to attack a second turn (which I have not determined) I will be prepared to make a sub-optimal attack in the interests of taking advantage of my capability of fighting unsupplied. That fits in with British tactics at the moment, because I need to elevate German DM as rapidly as possible and so long as British DM is far less than French DM, I will not worry so much about British losses.

There are some other features of this combat worth mentioning. I directed no advance after combat. That meant the Germans could have chosen to retreat and reoccupy the front line without losing control of their trench line. That would have reduced the efficiency of my supply use. I should have issued some conditional orders. I have also saved my air superiority for future combat this month.

The outcome of the attack is a loss ratio of 10:15 against the attackers on a 3/6 die split. This could have been better but I need not complain as the Germans did not retreat as I feared. I have not yet decided whether to continue the attack. If I do the loss ratio will likely get worse as I will not be so generous with supply. It also depends on how far the Germans go to replace their losses and perhaps increase the strength of this sector.

Overall, I think I can be more satisfied about the situation in the West than anywhere else. The Germans are going to have a difficult time wresting the initiative away from me and the only way they can do that – by making an offensive against the French also plays into my hands.