

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT104: 23 – 27 October 1915 (October 6)

General Situation

For all the campaigns which had been unleashed in the war to date very little had been settled. Peace gestures had been feeble since the embarrassment of the Tsar's near loss of nerve during the summer. If anything, this episode had demonstrated the considerable risks of attempting a political solution.

It seemed that as long as the belligerents sustained their belligerency then the national morale remained good. The only power which had suffered a steep decline of morale, Russia, had been the one which had toyed most with the attractions of peace. The most committed of the warring powers might be said to have been Serbia and Belgium who had not permitted the loss of their whole territory to dissuade them from continuing the battle and who also might claim to have the whole Entente fighting on their behalf.

These minor powers would not control the outcome of the war and nor was it likely Russia or Italy would. What was increasingly clear was that France and Britain counted far more than any others. If either of them faltered then the Entente would be broken. This was the counter-weight to the alliance of Germany and Austria which already had problems with its balance. While Germany seemed potent in every direction, Austria was hanging on for survival.

The Western Front

Activity on the Western Front had diminished. The small French advances in Picardy and Champagne were not yet fully resolved but the Germans left the French in peace for a few days.

This lull was recorded in Ernst Jünger's famous memoir of the war. He wrote of how he first had the idea for this work while enjoying some late autumn sun sitting outside a bunker near Soissons while his unit was attached to the 8th Ersatz Division. He wrote:

"I looked over my daily notes and realised that I had a book in them. I thought, why not start now? The French didn't seem likely to disturb even a poet in deepest contemplation of the ineffable. I found an empty page and began to compose my title. I had several attempts, Storm of War, Storm of Lead, Storm in France, and Storm of Fear. None of them really pleased me and I knew in my heart that Storm was just an overused word in anything to do with warfare, especially in the German language.

I tried to find another way, Men of Steel, Rain of Steel, Life against Steel, Steel Yourself. This seemed even worse. I was trying to keep iron out of the title as I didn't want to ape Bismarck. Steel sounded more modern but the reading public are very conservative in these things.

I knew another officer later in the war who had said he would write a book about infantry tactics and asked me what I should call it. I said "Infantry Tactics" and he seemed pleased with that. In my own case my brain could not give me the answer. I started asking everyone for ideas. A runner from a neighbouring Bavarian unit went past and stopped long enough to suggest "Our Struggle" but that was wrong because I knew that my memoir would be very personal and I couldn't claim to speak for everyone.

*I pondered this for at least 5 days during which time the French kept very quiet and the men had a good rest while getting supplies in for the next round of fighting. My journal notes for 27 October 1915 tell me I had then finally reached a conclusion as I recorded my Book Title – Shower of Metal”.*¹

The Italian Front

On 23 October, the Austro-Hungarian 6th Army launched a significant attack across the peaks of the Carnatic Dolomites and took the Italian 24th Division by surprise. For three days the Italians desperately defended the heights above Sappada (6-4.2915) before they were able to stabilise the situation. Even so the Austrian move had been well planned by Boroević. The Croat Mountain Infantry had led the attack and despite difficulty in keeping some of these troops supplied they had been well motivated and the Italian infantry had been wrong footed in the initial phases of the battle and needed reinforcement by Alpine brigades.

Cadorna was little concerned with the Sappada action as he was busy supervising a transfer of five Divisions from Friuli to the Lake Garda area. Winter was fast approaching and Cadorna thought there still might be time for one further success in the Trentino before the weather closed in.



Figure 1: The Austro-Hungarian attack at Sappada, 23 - 25 October 1915.

The Eastern Front

Compared with the great campaign during the first half of 1915, the fighting in East during the autumn was much more limited.

The German commander of the 11th Army, Mackensen, had been infuriated to have missed all of the action prior to the fall of Warsaw and his Army had been overshadowed by both the 10th and 8th

¹ Jünger was lucky to have a decent editor. His work had this title until just before the final proofs went to the press.

Armies on either of its flanks. In fact the 11th Army had always been pulled one way or other to provide support for either of its neighbours but had never taken the leading role itself until now.

On 23 October, the 11th Army was ordered to advance and moved forwards on a 120 kilometre front in eastern Lithuania. The following day the Russians were encountered in a region studded with lakes between Molletai (4-5N.2112) and Kaltanenai (4-5.2211). Two Opolchenie Brigades (19th and 23rd) attempted to block the Germans at Kaltanenai but both were broken up by the German 503rd Division which broke through the weak Russian defence on 25 October. The Russians were briefly very exposed and Mackensen urged his subordinates to be bold and even risk their lines of communication. However, a spectacular outcome was beyond the possibilities of the situation. One reason for this was that the Russians were able to quickly bring five Cavalry Divisions into the threatened area. These fulfilled their task of sealing the broken front just as a scab forms over a healing wound.



Figure 2: The German 11th Army moves forwards to Kaltanenai, 23 - 27 October 1915.

On 26 October, it was the turn of the Russian 1st Army to make an attack. This was against the 3rd Württemberg Reserve Division which was withdrawing from the Babite isthmus. The Russians had accumulated three brigades of big guns and this was one of the largest Russian artillery operations of the war until then. The guns target was the road through Jurmala and Salas (4-5N.1105) which the Württembergers would have to pass if they wanted to withdraw further. To encourage a retreat, the

Russians attacked with four Infantry Divisions assailing the Germans from both the east and the south.

The 26th and 43rd Russian Divisions had the best opportunity attacking the Germans from the south of Babite Lake. The Württembergers were very reluctant to be forced to retreat and, although the country was low lying, marshy, and forested, these “would-be” mountain troops tried to turn every hillock into an alpine fortress. The commander of the German Division was a tough veteran who was not troubled by the reality of the situation and the Russian infantry suffered badly from this determined resistance. It was not until the evening of the 27 October that the Württembergers could be induced to withdraw and that only when the commander of the German 10th Army came forward in person to explain to his subordinate it was not necessary to hold so far forward. The Russians were so chastened by this defence that they left Salas unoccupied (4-5N.1105).

The Balkans

The mood of Allied commanders in the Balkans in late October would best be described as cautious. In Albania, the front had moved north 80 kilometres and the Allies now held the larger half of the entire country. Caution made the commanders fear a trap but for the Montenegrin and Serbian infantry there was the new hope that they might just get back to liberate their homes before winter.

In South Serbia, the Allies had additionally a lack of troops to further constrain a rapid pursuit. In the Vardar Valley, the Bulgarians were able to completely break contact with the Serbians who had so far kept within 60 kilometres of the Greek frontier. The Serbians were also depleted of their cavalry after the recent fight for Radoviš (7-6.1709) so long range reconnaissance was not possible.



Figure 3: The Serbian - Allied advance in Albania and South West Serbia, 23 – 27 October 1915.

The Near East

Yudenitch, the Chief-of-Staff of the Russian Caucasus Army, was also concerned about the change of weather. He estimated that he had another month to break the Turkish defences before winter

might set in. Fresh Infantry units were starting to arrive near the front in late October using the narrow gauge railway the engineers had built forwards from Sarikamis. These were untested troops but there was no other type available.

At Basra, the port was overcrowded and struggling to cope with a large convoy of troops who had just arrived from India. Nixon visited in person and heard that some of the Indian recruits were expected to spend two weeks in their ships waiting for their turn to unload. This was completely unacceptable and the supervisors of the port administration were threatened with dismissal. Nixon was worried that when the 10th Division arrived from Egypt they also would be left wasting time on board and he didn't want this repeated. However, all Nixon's fire and steam made no difference as the construction materials needed to make improvements to the port were simply unobtainable.

Up above Ali Gharbi, Townsend's force was slowly moving forward. By 27 October, they were nearly half-way to Kut. Townsend wondered whether this place would defy his command for a third time.

DM Summary – October 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total [%SM]	Morale
Germany	11	1	10	3	-	1		11	37	957	Good
Austria-Hungary	3	-	5	-	-	1		-	9	429	Good
Ottoman	-	-	1	-	-	-		-	1	50	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	2	-		-	2	14	Good
Central Powers	14	1	16	3	2	2		11	49	1430	
France	12	-	9	-	-	-		-	21	665	Good
Great Britain	-	-	4	-	-	-		-	4	169	Good
Russia	6	2	6	4	-	4		-	22	638	Shaken
Italy	-	-	13	-	-	2		-	15	37	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-	-	(2) *	-		-	-	(31)	NA *Tirane recaptured
Entente	18	2	32	4	-	6		-	62	1506	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: I could be fooling myself, but I think the Russian forces – certainly in the northern half – are now a little off balance. I need to keep applying pressure. This turn I straighten my line between the Nieman and Schara and launch an attack against a weak pivot point in his 2nd Army line. If I can break in here, I risk enveloping his 2nd Army so may force elements of them out of their entrenchments. To achieve this I take some risk with the left flank of my 11th Army, which is hanging somewhat; but I think is secure.*

- *Balkans: More withdrawal after having allowed myself to leave an isolated Bulgarian Cav div to be destroyed. Robert never fails to spot a weakness and an opportunity. Well – almost never!*
- *West: In the west, I think he did fail to seize an opportunity. I was weak in the area of Lille and his British were strong. I thought he would shift his concentrations of arty in and smash away at me and hoped for a one turn respite. I got it and have now reinforced those trenches; including with some of my own arty.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: I am gradually withdrawing towards Kut again.*
- *Palestine: The raiding force is back in Palestine.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*
- *Italy: In the north, where the Dolomites meet the Italian Alps, the AH 6th (Mt) Army launches an attack to try and squeeze the Italians out of their salient there. I am hopeful of destroying up to 2 IT brigades.*

AP: I am surprised at how far back the CP is going in the Balkans (Ivor always surprises me with his retreats). The sense in it is perhaps that I cannot follow the whole way as my available force is rather small and will be vulnerable if I get too far from the safety of Greece especially as the front is extended by the movement into Bulgaria.

My most difficult decisions related to the Eastern Front. At the strategic level I am concerned that the Russians are being suckered into further fighting with the Germans when I would rather expend their efforts against the Turks and Austrians. My ultimate solution is another retreat to the Grave Threat Line but I would rather avoid that and it may not be called for yet.

At the operational level, my attack near Riga had a lot that could go wrong. It used a lot of precious supply (8 points). Also I had three Artillery Brigades committed and they may be vulnerable to loss if the Germans escalate the battle. In detail, the order in which I was obliged to take losses added to the risk to the Artillery and prevented an advance after combat. The combat result also went against me 2:1 in losses. I hope I am not going to regret it.