

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg - Centenary Game

GT107: 6 – 9 November 1915

General Situation

The German General Staff Headquarters in Spa, Belgium, displayed always a calm atmosphere and on the occasions the Kaiser visited it naturally put forward its most professional and efficient face. Despite this, when graced with the Imperial presence on 7 November, Falkenhayn and his chief lieutenants could not help but betray a measure of anxiety. It was difficult to identify a front where the recent news was encouraging. Mackensen's advance toward the Dvina was something, but it was obvious the Kaiser was more interested in the situation of the 5th Army which was commanded by his son and evidently facing a difficult situation in Lorraine. Falkenhayn could have done without this distraction. A British attack in Artois had been expected for about two weeks and the latest information was that this was now imminent as large numbers of British infantry had been seen moving up to the trench lines in the last few days and artillery concentrations had been spotted. The German 1st Army was convinced that the British would strike within the next 24 hours.

In fact, the Kaiser was right to be worried about the attack in Lorraine and it did not bode well that he and Falkenhayn were straining in different directions.

The Western Front

Joffre was, in contrast, well pleased with the situation on 7 November. The French offensive in Lorraine by the French 3rd and 4th Armies was about to increase in intensity. In the past few days additional forces had been railed to this previously quiet front. Most of what could be spared were reserve divisions but two strong colonial divisions (4th Colonial and 38th Algerian) would be at the forefront of the attacks. The French kept up strong artillery barrages and infantry assaults around the Lac de Madine (5-3.2216) during several days and the expenditure of ammunition was almost unprecedented for the size of the forces engaged.

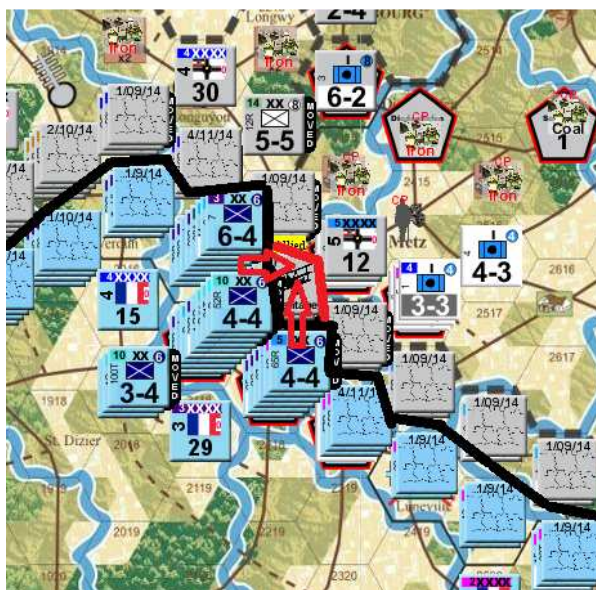


Figure 1: The French break the German front in Lorraine, 6 - 9 November 1915.

The situation of the Germans in the face of the continuous French attacks was very fragile. The Crown Prince had withdrawn the German 21st Division on 6 November and the defence had been taken over by the understrength 2nd Division supported by a brigade of Ersatz infantry. They had little time to familiarise themselves with the terrain before the French made their biggest assault so far at Domèvre-en-Haye (5-3.2216) on the south flank where the French 3rd Army attempted to break out from their fortifications covering Toul. The situation reached a crisis for the Germans when, on the evening of the 8 November, the German line broke at Domèvre as the Ersatz infantry were driven to abandon their lines by the heavy shellfire and the proximity of large bodies of Colonial infantry. Next morning, the French began rolling up the German line from the south. There were no other German reserves nearby and by noon a rout was in progress. Late on 9 November, the French reached ground that was in sight of Pont-à-Mousson and the bridges across the Moselles apparently undefended. On the opposite side of the river the German Crown Prince watched appalled by the sudden French advance and ordered the bridges to be hastily blown.

Joffre's confidence in these operations was strengthened further by knowledge that the British would also attack on 8 November. The British attack was delivered between Guemappe and Croisilles (5-3.1009) where the aim was to allow the 3rd Army to develop a movement that would converge with additional attacks by the 4th Army further south. Unlike the French, the British were moving into the teeth of a strong German defence in which four Divisions had been identified along the critical sector. The attack began well enough on 8 November with the capture of the village of St Léger next to Croisilles but the British infantry got stuck between the German second and third line. That afternoon, the Germans made powerful counterattacks supported by heavy artillery barrages which smashed up British formations which were densely concentrated in the battle zone. Casualties were particularly high in the inexperienced 4th Army which was decisively repulsed when it renewed attacks south of St Léger on 9 November.



Figure 2: Battle of Guemappe – Croisilles, 8 - 9 November 1915.

The outcome of this effort did nothing for the reputation of the British Army. At the moment when the French appeared to have broken through, the British seemed to have learned nothing from previous battles. The public had tolerated the disappointing gains of previous efforts but something better was expected now. It had been understood that with increasing artillery strength Sir John French would be finally able to break the German front. The British artillery was still comparatively modest in its capabilities relative to the French and Germans and this attack was more powerful than previous efforts but it still failed relative to the hopes that had been engendered. There were also too many examples of ineffective or confused operations.

In the background, the commander of the 1st Army, Douglas Haig, was scheming against Sir John French and the results of 8 – 9 November fed his campaign to undermine his superior. Since, Haig had transferred his I Corps to support this attack and he had heard it had been misused and had suffered heavy losses around Croisilles he added this to his grievances. Thanks to his contacts in I Corps, Haig had early information that the fatal casualties at Croisilles included the sons of no less than 14 peers of the realm, two of them in the Cabinet. Haig was in later times accused of many things of which he was not guilty but the letters of condolence which he arranged to be sent were, to put it mildly, unhelpful to the authority of Sir John French.

The Italian Front

Italy was *en fête* at the end of the first week of November 1915 with church bells ringing in every town to celebrate the capture of Riva del Garda. This caused the Pope no little displeasure, but that simply added to the joy of Italian Liberals. This victory also dispelled any nascent criticism of the army command following the disappointment of the 2nd Isonzo Offensive.

The Austrians also pulled out of Arco and Comano Terme (6-4.2018) on 7 November as they straightened their lines in the Trentino. This allowed the Italian 1st Army to move forward and by 9 November its front line was positioned opposite the Austrian defences covering Trent itself. It seemed impossible that the Italians would not make some attempt to win such a treasured objective before winter, but a frontal assault was recognised, even by Cadorna, to be a suicidal proposition. Instead, Italian planning focussed on another salient around Lavarone (6-4.2218) which covered the south eastern approaches to Trent. It was unlikely that the Italians could get to their main prize without dealing with this fortified district first.

The Eastern Front

The German 11th Army was getting tired and the shortening days meant that operations had to be crushed into the diminishing daylight. This helped the Russian 2nd Rifle Division withdraw under cover of darkness from an engagement at Dusetos (4.5N.2109) on 7 November.

Despite the fatigue, Mackensen's command had done enough to provoke wider retreats from the Russians. The Russian 2nd Army had pulled back to strong positions behind the Dvina at Daugavpils and this forced the Russian 12th Army to begin to retire as well.

The whole German front in the east was now fairly loose and the advance to the Dvina was balanced by a withdrawal from the Pripet Marshes. By 6 November, the German front here was minimally garrisoned while the main strength was moved further back. The Austro-Hungarian 1st Army also joined in this manoeuvre. The Russians were slowly probing forwards. The Russian 4th Army was establishing forward positions east of Pinsk and down the eastern bank of the Lower Styr River. The Russian 9th Army also made a strong push to the north east of Rovno but in none of these Russian actions did they encounter serious opposition from the Germans or Austrians.



Figure 3: Movements in the Pripet Marshes, 6 - 9 November 1915.

The Balkans

As the Central Powers slowly moved northwards they still showed no clear determination to hold ground in northern Albania and south west Serbia. The Serbian Army however was shifting units east favouring a concentration in the Vardar Valley rather than in the mountainous regions on the Adriatic side of the front. The Allied forces in Albania were therefore being slowly thinned out. The commander of the Italian 14th Division sent a message dated 8 November to the Foreign Ministry in Rome stating that at the rate everyone else was leaving the country Albania might be under exclusively Italian protection within a few weeks.

The Near East

In the Sinai desert, the Turkish columns approached the Suez Canal once again. The Indian 18th Brigade had been sent forward to delay this movement but by 9 November they had been forced to withdraw to their entrenchments at Romani (8-8.1138) once more.

In Mesopotamia, Townsend had reports that the Turks were evacuating Kut on 6 – 7 November and he urged his units forward in order to gain this town which had eluded his grasp twice before. However, such were the obstacles of the country and such had been the needs of guarding against

the possibility of a Turkish counter-move that the advance up the Tigris had become painfully slow. Townsend was enraged when he was told on 9 November that the I Indian Corps did not expect to reach Kut until 12 November.

The Russian victory at Adri (6-8.2418) had allowed a significant penetration of the Turkish defences east of Erzerum. On 6 November, the Turkish 3rd Army ordered a general retreat in the Aras Valley and to the south over a 100 kilometre length of front. The Turks fell back about 20 kilometres and the Russians slowly followed them.

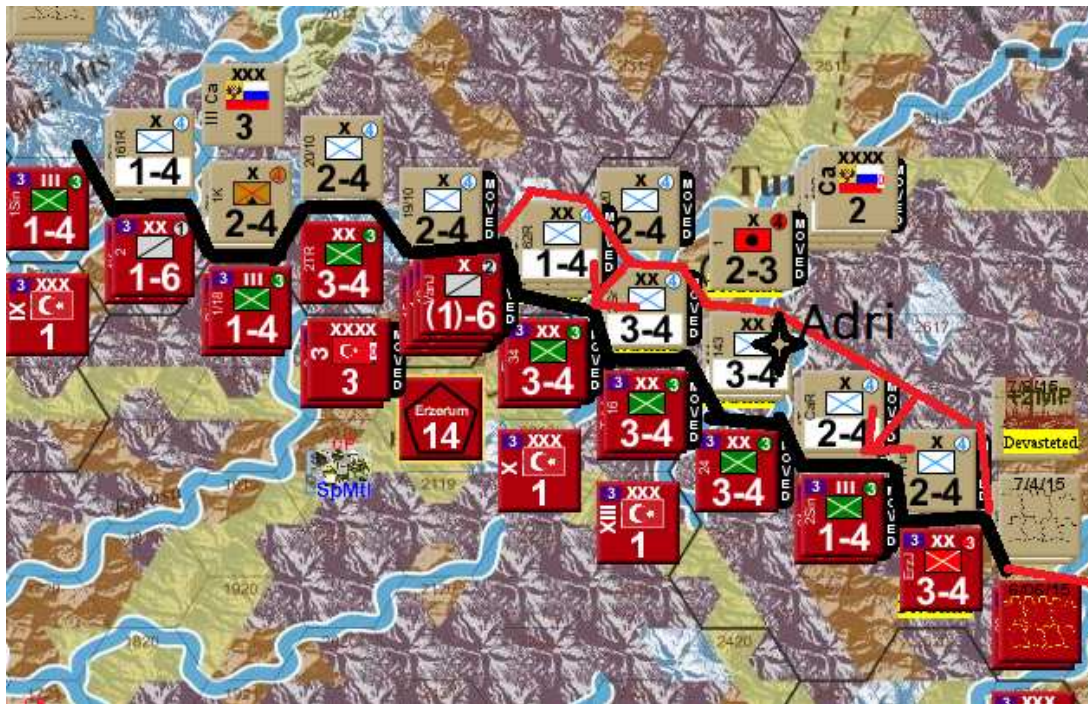


Figure 4: The Russian advance following their victory at Adri, 3 - 9 November 1915

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: I believe within one or two more attacks the northern Russian armies will scuttle back beyond their GTL. I want to push them back and then consolidate for the winter. So, another attack goes in to keep pressuring him SW of Davvagpils. On the northern flank of the AH line, I also start to shift westwards to more open ground where I will dig in for winter.*
- *Balkans: More of the same – gradual withdrawal; but only in places. Skopje is an important rail link for me, so I need to hold the approaches just to the south of it.*
- *West: His offensive against my positions SW of Metz was excellently executed and annihilated the best part of a division. I now have to move fresh forces into this location as I cannot let it fall. I have no reserves available to shift that far just yet, so need to hold out for one more turn before those fresh reserves can arrive along this portion of the front.*
- *Caucasus: The Turks did not hold their line after his last attack but, in being evicted from their trenches, allows me to straighten the front and better concentrate my defence and he is still not in a position to interdict my LOC running SE along the valley.*

- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: He has actually advanced his forward brigade into the Sinai to meet my raid. This came as a surprise and I wonder what he is up to here.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet. Remarkably, having removed the 10th Irish Division from the front – which I thought was a prelude to evacuation – he has brought in fresh reinforcements.*
- *Italy: A 2nd attack at Riva captured what was left of the fortification. I use this as a reason to straighten my lines in the Trentino.*

DM Summary – November 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	6	15						11	32	991	Good
Austria-Hungary	1	-						1	2	435	Good
Ottoman	1	-						-	1	53	Good
Bulgaria	-	-						-	-	14	Good
Central Powers	8	15						12	33	1473	
France	4	2						-	6	671	Good
Great Britain	-	14						-	14	183	Good
Russia	3	1						-	4	647	Shaken
Italy	2	-						-	2	40	Good
Belgium	-	-						-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-						-	-	(31)	NA
Entente	9	17						-	26	1538	

AP: *I spent 63 supply points on my two attacks in the West and there were 189 SP engaged. Whatever I roll this has got to hurt a bit and the counterattack against the French will not be strong.*

So it proves for the loss ratios are 8:2 in the French favour and 6:14 against the British. The French also advance to take a hex. This works out very well for me as keeping French losses low is one of my main objectives. Another way to look at it is that I expended 15 French supply and only lost 2 SP. That represents economising lives. Another point of view is that a year ago French DM was 41 more than German DM. Now German DM is 320 above the French and sufficiently high that a Verdun style campaign in 1916 might bring in the Americans early.

I am now back to being optimistic as I feel justified now not having raced in and attacked when the Germans made their withdrawals in Picardy and on the Marne in the summer. At that time I needed to slow down the pace of the game because there was still a danger that French losses would run away during heavy fighting. Now I would say it is the CP that needs to slow things down and I may not ease up.

I cannot spend 63 supply points in one turn very often, so there is likely to be a winter lull and German weapon production gears up in 1916. This only lasts until Shaken Morale. The CP needs that period of high production to endure as long as possible.