

## Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT111: 23 – 26 November 1915 (November 6)

### General Situation

It was a common perception across Europe in November 1915 that all the powers were engaged in a last desperate effort to grasp an advantage before the winter set in. Exhaustion was also now a factor but where necessary strength could still be unleashed. Above all this occurred in the late season attack on Riga. This battle was every bit as big as the titanic struggles on the Western Front.

### The Eastern Front



Figure 1: The first assaults during the Battle of Riga, 23 - 26 November 1915.

The Battle of Riga was controlled by a clash of wills between the Tsar and Hindenburg and Ludendorff. The German generals were searching for a prize with which to demonstrate their supremacy over the Russian Army. The commitment of three German Armies to this struggle on the Baltic Front had weakened the whole of the rest of the Central Powers fronts in the East. Indeed it was a commitment of a strategic reserve which might have affected the course of events on any front. OberOst therefore were anxious to have some yield from their investment in this objective and would not give up easily.

The Tsar had made it be known that he regarded Riga as a key strategic asset of the Russian Empire and announced it would be defended to the utmost by the Imperial Army. This was a hostage to fortune. The Army was tired and to gamble the prestige of the dynasty on Riga was incautious.

When the German attack began on 23 November they had fourteen Divisions join or support the attacks. The main thrust was by the German 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Armies against the south eastern approaches to the city. The infantry had been told they might have to fight in the city but the Russians had strong defences beyond the city margins and it was still a fight for the woods, marshes and suburban districts which dotted the outskirts of Riga. A second German thrust along the coast did not have much impact as there was no good access from that direction into the city which was not blocked by the estuary of the river or the industrial landscape of the warehouse districts by the river. For a few days the German 15<sup>th</sup> Division watched this side of the city but made no attempt to move in.

Meanwhile, there was continuous fighting on the main line of advance over four days. Three Russian Divisions were destroyed by the weight of the initial attack (Guard Rifles, 71<sup>st</sup> Reserve, and 114<sup>th</sup> Opolchenie Division). In their place, the Russian 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Armies rushed four additional Divisions into the city on 25 November to prevent a collapse of the defence. As the Germans got closer to the city outskirts (the German 16<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Divisions were on the city boundary on 25 November) they came under fire from Russian howitzers firing over open sights. The Russians had accumulated enough ammunition to keep these guns generously supplied having expected this attack for some time.

On the morning of 26 November, the commanders of the Russian 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Armies met on the north shore of the Dvina and confirmed that the resistance would continue. The Tsar had made no other choice possible. This ensured that one of the bloodiest battles yet seen on the Eastern Front would continue.

On the remainder of the Eastern Front, the retreats of the Central Powers continued. The German 8<sup>th</sup> Army had pulled back behind Vilna once again. Further south the Austrian 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Armies had moved back towards their own border abandoning Kowel and Luck. The Russians, however, were hardly making a rapid pursuit. The Russian 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Armies moved swiftly forward again to recover the positions on the Neiman and Shchara Rivers from which it had been driven by the German attack in October (the German 12<sup>th</sup> Army which had led that attack had moved subsequently to Riga). The Russian advance in the Pripet Marshes remained much slower and a gap of 100 kilometres was opened up between the two sides between Pinsk and Rovno.

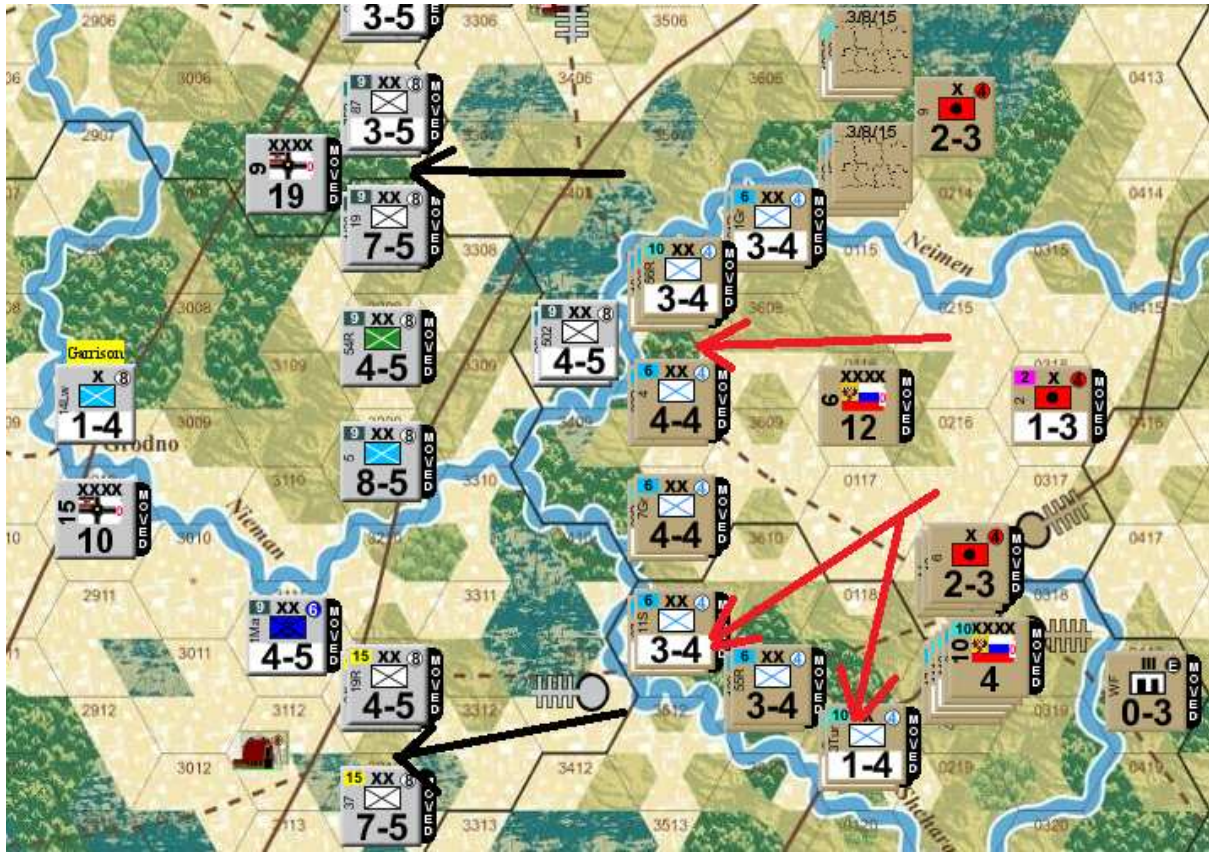


Figure 2: The Russians move forward to the Neiman - Shchara line, 23 - 26 November 1915.

### The Balkans

On 23 November, the Austrian 5<sup>th</sup> and Bulgaria 1<sup>st</sup> Armies made a movement forwards in western Serbia and in Albania. Ahead of them were very weak Allied forces which had been exposed by the shift of the Serbian Army into the Vardar valley. The remaining Allied covering forces, composed of Montenegrins and Italians in Albania, were forced to fall back.

At Salonika, the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Division unloaded at the port on 25 – 26 November. This was the first full strength British Division to appear in the Balkans. This unit had been withdrawn from the Dardanelles but only reached Greece after a brief diversion to Egypt

### The Near East

There was little to report from the Gallipoli beachheads or from Egypt where the latest crisis had subsided.

In the Caucasus, the Grand-Duke had been in contact with the Tsar's headquarters. The Grand-Duke had confirmed that Yudenitch thought that a further attack on the Turkish lines was possible before winter. Visitors to the National Museum in Tiflis can today see a yellowed slip of paper which has the Cyrillic text of the telegraphed reply of the Tsar, "Wait take no action, situation in Riga critical."

The only active operation was that in Mesopotamia. Townsend's expedition was now moving more slowly towards Baghdad at a rate of no more than 3 miles a day. Baghdad itself was about 80 kilometres ahead but supplies were low and many units understrength.



## The Western Front

At Dunkirk, to Haig's relief, supplies were finally being unloaded in sufficient quantity to replenish the stocks of the British Expeditionary Force. The front had gone very quiet again and from the sea to Switzerland the days passed with no major initiatives.

## The Italian Front



Figure 3: The attack on San Martin di Castrozza, 25 – 26 November 1915.

At Cadorna's urging, the Italian 4<sup>th</sup> Army struck again in the Dolomites. On 25 November, four Italian Divisions pushed into the valley leading up to the Passo di Rolle. On this narrow front, they found their way blocked by Austrian mountain brigades holding San Martino di Castrozza (6-4.2416). The days were getting very short and the nights very cold in these high valleys. The Italian infantry lacked mountain warfare training and they could not take advantage of the isolation of the defenders who were a long way from their own supply base on the Bozen – Trent railway. The Italian infantry could make no further progress once they started to take heavy losses from accurate Austrian small arms fire. The last Italian efforts expired on 26 November with the Austrians still in control of the access to the pass.

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: I have decent screening forces to block or threaten any Russian flanking interference so now I launch an attack against Riga. It is difficult, being urban terrain, but I have amassed a strong force of three armies to assail it. I do not expect to capture it straight away, but I should be able to badly hurt the Russians and maybe even compel them to consider relinquishing control rather than bleed heavily and still lose the city. The rest of the front bends westwards to try and control as many food resources as possible*

*whilst also evacuating captured conurbations. The Russian may seek to reoccupy some of the food centres which will bring them into the open and hopefully expose them to attack. My line is not so thinly spread that I cannot rapidly concentrate corps or armies to attack.*

- *Balkans: He has placed himself in a position whereby I may be able to drive a wedge between the Italo-Montenegrin force and the Anglo-Serbian one. A slim chance, but I take it and advance on my right flank.*
- *West: My last attack against Bethune caused more large British losses but their counterattack was also quite punishing. I have spent my offensive activity in the west for now and look forward to a winter stalemate.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: I am too weak here so fall back towards Baghdad to force him to stretch his LOC.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet again after his last attack which again saw losses to the British on a ratio of 4:1. Robert is being quite profligate with his British lives.*
- *Italy: I do some rebuilding and reinforcing and prepare for the winter.*

#### DM Summary – November 1915

| Nation          | 1 | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7 | Food Deficit | Month | Total | Morale                                |
|-----------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|--------------|-------|-------|---------------------------------------|
| Germany         | 6 | 15 | 7  | 5  | 7  | 13 |   | 11           | 64    | 1023  | Good                                  |
| Austria-Hungary | 1 | -  | 1  | 2  | -  | 1  |   | 1            | 6     | 439   | Good                                  |
| Ottoman         | 1 | -  | -  | 2  | 2  | -  |   | -            | 5     | 57    | Good                                  |
| Bulgaria        | - | -  | -  | 1  | -  |    |   | -            | 1     | 15    | Good                                  |
| Central Powers  | 8 | 15 | 8  | 10 | 9  | 14 |   | 12           | 76    | 1514  |                                       |
| France          | 4 | 2  | -  | -  | -  | -  |   | -            | 6     | 671   | Good                                  |
| Great Britain   | - | 14 | 15 | 13 | 16 | -  |   | -            | 58    | 227   | Good                                  |
| Russia          | 3 | 1  | 2  | -* | -  | 11 |   | -            | 17    | 660   | Shaken<br>*Pinsk and Rovno recaptured |
| Italy           | 2 | -  | 1  | 5  | -  | 2  |   | -            | 10    | 48    | Good                                  |
| Belgium         | - | -  | -  | -  | -  | -  |   | -            | -     | (96)  | NA                                    |
| Serbia          | - | -  | -  | 1  | -  | -  |   | -            | 1     | (32)  | NA                                    |
| Entente         | 9 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 16 | 13 |   | -            | 92    | 1604  |                                       |

AP: *This turn was dominated by the attack on Riga. The German attack had a combat strength of 91 and my counterattack (fully supplied) had strength of 60 after tripling. The Russians in a city hex*

*could not be forced to retreat which was necessary because they lost 11 out of 16 infantry defenders. The German losses were 13 after I rolled 6 with a plus one modifier.*

*The big question is whether the Germans will attack again.*

*While I am happy with my first combat result this is rather qualified. I have underestimated again the aggression of my opponent and if his aim is to provide respite for the Austrians then he has succeeded because I don't think the Russians will be good for much for a long time now. I am also in a quandary. Riga is very hard to take, especially when the river and urban hex side come into it. However, I have not retreated to the north bank (why didn't I). The city may be impregnable but I can only hold it so long as I can tolerate the attrition.*