

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT113: 1 – 5 December 1915 (December 1)

General Situation

“It required no insight to know that I was present at a remarkable historical moment. On a cold morning a select group assembled on a hillside on Salisbury Plain. Most were military men, Army and Navy. Some politicians were there. I recognised Churchill who could not stand still for an instant but was always pointing or prodding at anything which momentarily attracted his attention be it some one’s coat button or some innocent gate post. It would be hard to realise from his ebullience that he was out of office and I ought to have wondered how he had inserted himself into such a delegation on such a top secret affair.

At a signal a screen was removed and three giant mechanical beasts were revealed. Their engines suddenly ignited and black exhaust smoke belched out of their innards. These were the leviathans we had come to see. They were going to have a race so we all placed bets on either the beetle, or the caterpillar, or the armadillo. These creatures seemed to have jumped from the pages of the most speculative writers. I remember the feeling that occurred to me that the armadillo could have conquered the moon if Jules Verne could have transported it there. I placed three guineas on it to complete the course ahead of the others for I thought its snout would part the barbed wire obstacle on the opposite hill.

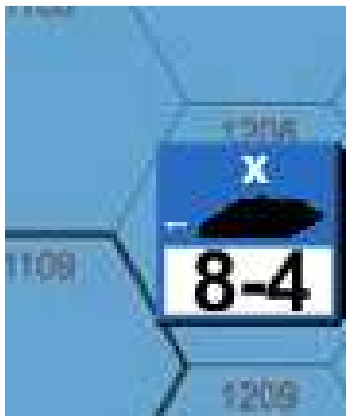


Figure 1: One of the earliest known blueprints for a tank, December 1915 (Imperial War Museum Collection).¹

And then they were off! The tanks (as we were taught to call them) lurched forward and for a moment or two you imagined real speed but they quickly settled down to a more steady pace – putting it kindly. The beetle went ahead first but it entered the first trench and then did not emerge again. It was examined later overturned on its back still hissing nitrous emissions in protest at the testing conditions. I lost my wager. The armadillo’s snout could not push the wire aside as intended and its engine spluttered its last as it rocked back and forward to get free of entanglement. The caterpillar meanwhile crushed all wire and bridged the trenches cresting the hill in a triumph of clattering metal.

¹ This particular diagram was long thought to be the earliest blueprint, but it is likely the date was misread (it is illegible in the original) for the plan is not for one of the so-called Inferior Models being tested in late-1915 but is a model which would have been in construction a year later.

Before we left there was talk about building more caterpillars. The men from the War Office were all keen. They knew we could take the order. It was said Haig wanted to try them out next year. We would have to get cracking. I estimated that it would take nine months to get the first batch ready for France...

I should have realised the men from the ministry wouldn't act so fast. Back at the factory we waited day after day for the order to arrive. I first thought it must have gone to Vickers or some other outfit but that was not the reason as I later discovered. Meanwhile we fiddled about trying to keep the production space free for a priority job. When the famous Tank Production Requisition 48-5 finally arrived on 1 January, I had more or less decided we would go into aircraft engine manufacture so we had to turn round on a penny and start the tanks that day. People called me a war profiteer, but I kept our biggest factory on short time for a month just because the London paper pushers couldn't work out what would be the best name for the project."²

The Eastern Front



Figure 2: The Germans force their way into Riga, 1 - 5 December 1915.

The conditions on the Eastern Front were increasingly frigid. The Baltic trade in the Gulf of Bothnia was being slowed by ice floes. The British purchasing commission based in Narvik was in business again as the Swedes sought to export iron ore through Norway as their own ports started to ice up.

The Russians at Riga had hoped that the worst of the fighting was behind them but the Germans gave them no rest. Hindenburg and Ludendorff egged on the Army Group pressing against the Russian defences. Although there was only enough artillery ammunition to supply little more than a

² *The Manufactured Victory by An Anonymous Captain of Industry*, Manchester, (1922)

regiment of heavy howitzers, the Germans managed to keep some guns firing. Strong infantry attacks were made on the Russian perimeter on three consecutive days starting on 1 December. On 3 December patrols from the 3rd Württemberg Reserve Division found their way almost to the centre of the city. The Russian defence was visibly weakening and on 4 December, Mackensen's 11th Army reported large numbers of Russians streaming back to the bridges across the Dvina.

The Germans were too exhausted themselves to do anything to stop the Russian retreat but they secured the whole of the south bank of the Dvina by 5 December which included the city centre. The Russians still held the industrial districts lining the north bank of the river and they demonstrated some defiance by siting their own heavy guns covering the crossing points and were seemingly determined to allow no further German advance.

The Russian news service was also defiantly contradicting all German claims that they had captured the city and circulating pictures of Russian troops standing nonchalantly outside the head office of a well-known Latvian insurance company ("Balver"). This building was also on the north side of Riga.

Despite this the Tsar had a physical collapse as a result of this German success. He had staked so much on saving Riga that he could not consider losing half the city as anything other than a personal disaster. He was confined to bed for five days.

The Balkans

By 3 December, the Austro-Hungarian 5th Army was fully secure on the north side of the Man River in northern Albania and the Italian-Montenegrin forces were falling back to Tirane. Outside the Balkans few were aware or interested in these minor shifts in the front. Few foreign correspondents ventured to this region.

The Near East

The Near Eastern fronts were now frozen by inactivity and literally so in the Caucasus Mountains.

Yudenitch could not attack the Turks in Armenia as he was under strict instructions from the Grand-Duke to save lives. STAVKA had made it very clear reinforcements could not be spared for the Caucasus front for a long while.

Munro at the Dardanelles was in much the same fix. Recent attacks had been very wasteful and the attitude of the British and Australian public had altered. The heavy bloodshed on the Western Front in recent weeks reinforced the sense that manpower was after all finite.

Townsend, in Iraq, was subject to different constraints. The Turks had withdrawn to a close defence of Baghdad but Townsend's force was too small to consider encirclement. A frontal assault also seemed out of the question as there was too little ammunition in reserve. Townsend had been reinforced, at the beginning of December, by a small flotilla of river boats which had been armoured for combat but this was not sufficient to change the likely consequences of an attack on the city. Townsend pinned his hopes on logistical work which might in time bring more resources to his far-flung command.



Figure 3: Townsend at the gates of Baghdad, 1 - 5 December 1915.

The Western Front

Haig and Joffre were united in opinion at the beginning of December 1915. There would be a further major Allied offensive on the Western Front but it would not occur until the British had replaced the losses suffered in Dark November. Haig proposed that he would be ready in May 1916, but Joffre thought a summer offensive in June would be best taking advantage of the long days. Both believed that German morale would by then be at breaking point. The combined Allied forces would then be so strong and backed with such numerous artillery that they would surely be able to decisively defeat the Germans.

The Italian Front

As the weather closed in on the Alps, the average Italian infantryman expected to be taken out of the lines and given an extended rest. This was not, however, Cadorna's method. Orders had been given to all Army commanders to increase the strength of all defensive positions along the whole front line. Leave was to be granted only at reduced rates.

At the time these orders were considered a small scandal by opinion both within and outside the Italian Army. Cadorna's post-war biographers, however, were told by him and his personal papers that he had intelligence of an imminent Austrian offensive and these were simple precautions against such an eventuality. It was necessary to improve defences everywhere because the source (believed to be a high ranking Italian national in the Hapsburg government passing information through Switzerland) could not say where the offensive would occur. It might even have been on the Russian front and for this reason the Russian commanders on their South West Front were also considering the strength of their positions on the borders of Galicia.

DM Summary – December 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	2							11	13	1043	Good
Austria-Hungary	-							1	1	440	Good
Ottoman	-							-	-	57	Good
Bulgaria	-							-	-	15	Good
Central Powers	2							12	14	1535	
France	-							-	-	671	Good
Great Britain	-							-	-	227	Good
Russia	5							-	5	679	Shaken – Riga (S) lost
Italy	-							-	-	48	Good
Belgium	-							-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-							-	-	(32)	NA
Entente	5							-	5	1623	

Player Notes

CP: *I had hoped that my evacuation of many of the Russian personnel centres I was holding would net me a positive food benefit. However, I occupy 13 Russian food centres and exactly 13 personnel worth of cities – no benefit accrued. So the food situation continues to be my source of greatest concern.*

- *East: I am sending substantial supply and RPL to reinforce the attack on Riga and, even though sorely lacking in supply at the beginning of the month, I need to maintain pressure and keep bleeding the Russians out here. So, even though winter is starting to bite, I launch an attack on Riga. The rest of the front continues to pull back and straighten. If the Russian follow on, they will have to move into open ground where they will be more vulnerable. It also dramatically shortens my own supply lines.*
- *Balkans: I make more minor advances in Montenegro which will begin to create a wedge between the Italo-Montenegrin forces and those of the Anglo-Serbians.*
- *West: Resupply, rebalance and reinforcement.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: My HQs are now in Baghdad.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

AP: I have started tank production!³ It takes 9 months to produce a tank unit so we will not be seeing much more of them until late 1916.

Of more immediate interest is the question as to when the next offensives will be required by GCR 22. The supply stockpile limits increase for most nations in 1916 and that means a longer pause between offensives will be possible. However, Austria is going to be forced to take action this month. Conrad must be impatient with the current defensive strategy of the Hapsburgs.

Nation	Supply – 7 November 1915	Monthly Production	Stockpile allowed 1916 (1915)	Latest date of offensive (end of)
Germany	198	77	475	March 1916
Austria-Hungary	121	26	170 (140)	November 1915
Ottoman	26	2	30	February 1916
France	71	30	275	June 1916
Great Britain	37	24	175	May 1916
Russia	85	14	200	September 1916
Italy	10	10	75	June 1916

These dates are a reflection of the fact that all the Allied powers have run their supply down in combat in the last couple of months. This will relieve me of the penalty for winter attacks but more importantly allow the Entente to moderate the exposure of each power to combat according to my priorities. For instance, I could choose to take the Russians out of the action until September 1916 which would go some way to restoring them from their recent heavy losses and would allow the necessary supply build up for a Brusilov style spectacular. Of course, if I do that the French will be left far too exposed, but the point is the less pressure GCR 22 puts on a side the more flexibility it has in balancing its operations.

It is also clear that in 1916 (and before that for the Austrians) the CP is going to be forced to take action first and therefore I will be able to formulate a counter-punch strategy. Since the Germans need a rest to rebuild their combat strength then the demand for action in early 1916 is going to be awkward for them in some measure. In fact the table shows Austria is already in breach of the rule which was not noticed until the December 2 turn. I have proposed to Ivor that he attacks with the Austrians within three turns.

It should also be noted that small offensives do not relieve GCR 22 pressure only big ones do (or lots of small attacks if you must) and the attacker has to be using more supply than the defender.

I should mention Riga. I wasn't surprised that the Germans made an unsupplied attack since the defence was also unsupplied. With a 6/1 die split the outcome was grim for the Russians and I just had to pull back across the river. The CP has supplies and replacements heading for the Eastern Front. I am pleased (am I really?) to be drawing his resources east again but should I give him the chance to use them?

³ Not quite, I have to wait until January before the tank production allowance is sufficient to put in production the first unit.