

## Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT114: 6 – 9 December 1915 (December 2)

### General Situation

On 8 December the Chantilly Conference opened between high ranking military representatives of all the Allied powers. Joffre was host and as he greeted his guests he took them on a tour of the Château (5-3.0815) showing them the damage caused by German shells a year previously when this place had been perilously close to the front. He suggested some progress was undeniable in that the German Artillery was no longer in range (not the ordinary guns at least).



Figure 1: The movement of the Western Front away from Paris and Chantilly between 8 December 1914 (red) and 8 December 1915 (black).

The principle purpose of the Conference was to attempt to agree a coordinated approach to the campaign of 1916. Joffre had already agreed with Haig that the French and British would cooperate on the Western Front and would agree the timings of their main effort which were expected to commence no earlier than 1 May. It was not difficult to get the Italians to agree to such a programme for they did not expect the weather to clear on their front before then. Neither did the Italians demur at all from the offensive intention of their Allies. It was crystal clear the efforts in France and the Alps would have to be redoubled in the following year if the resolve of their enemies was to be broken.

It was also agreed that the main efforts would be made on these principle fronts and diversion of force to the Balkans and the Near East was to be kept to a minimum. It was an open secret at this conference that the campaign in the Dardanelles was going to be wound down soon. The French did not want to be left out of the campaign in the South Balkans so they were anxious to transfer their forces in Turkey to Salonika. Neither did the French wish to encourage the British or Russians to extend their campaigns in Iraq or the Caucasus in case that weakened commitment to the main

European conflict. Both the British and Russian delegations assured Joffre that these efforts would not be at the expense of the primary theatres.

The greatest difficulty of the Chantilly Conference was Russia. Its delegate, Zhilinsky, affected to be appalled at the timetable of the Western Allies. He was very frank. There was no possibility that Russia would join in an offensive in May. The Russian Army was even then still fighting the 1915 campaign at Riga and Zhilinsky had enough inside knowledge to know just how that battle had been draining Russian strength and morale.

Completely discounting the not inconsiderable Western Allied offensives during the past two months, Zhilinsky depicted a war in which the Russians were doing everything and their allies nothing of interest at all. He insisted that would have to change. In fact, the Russian general carried with him a threat that he communicated very directly. He predicted that unless the French and the British started attacking soon then Russia would within very few months be on the brink of collapse. He stated the situation on the Eastern Front was very unstable. Apart from the German assault on Riga, he related that STAVKA were concerned about an imminent Austrian offensive in the south. It was entirely possible that further major retreats would have to be ordered and, if that happened, it would be impossible to organise a counter-offensive until the following autumn. For these reasons, he proposed that a French and British attack in May 1916 was too late and could not be coordinated with any Russian action.

Joffre tried to smooth over this discordant message with two or three lavish dinners but the difference could not be wished away. Most of the Western representatives were inclined to think the Russian delegation were exaggerating their problems and when this sentiment reached the ears of the Russians they concluded they were not being listened to properly.

The best that could be done was that the Western delegations agreed to review their plans and attack earlier than May if it could possibly be done. Some suggested March might be possible but this depended on the flow of men and supplies speeding up or the snows melting sooner. The public communique made no reference to specific plans but emphasised the ultimate unity of purpose of the Allies and their intentions to translate this into planning future campaigns. This was considered most satisfactory by the uncritical press.

### **The Eastern Front**

The Battle for Riga did not end when the Germans moved into the city centre. Now the two sides confronted each other over the River Dvina. The Germans were determined to drive the Russians away and allow them to occupy the industrial areas on the north bank of the river.

A crossing in the city was considered too hazardous and the Germans looked to cross upstream of the city. The German 11<sup>th</sup> Army considered the options and elected an assault across the river at Salaspils (4-5N.1404). Mackensen was hoping that the Russians were already defeated by the trials of the city defence and that they would be too demoralised to conduct a stubborn defence of the river bank. The plan also depended on using a large number of river boats which had been captured in Riga and even a German river patrol boat that had come up from Königsberg.

The assault troops were loaded into the vessels during the night of 5 – 6 December and moved upstream in the dark. The Russians did not fire being uncertain as to whether the boats were

friendly or not. At dawn the Germans swiftly crossed the river and started unloading. Soon the German infantry were attracting the fire of Russian heavy artillery which also targeted the boats which were returning to the south bank for reinforcements. German guns were also firing over the river though their efforts were impaired by shortages of ammunition. There had been insufficient time to bring their depots far enough forward.



Figure 2: The Salaspils Crossing, 6 - 7 December 1915.

The Germans were more successful at this operation than they perhaps had a right to be. However, the more men that crossed the river, the larger the German attacks and in the end the greater the cost as they tried to expand their small bridgeheads against stubborn Russian resistance. The Russians therefore were not running and they had positioned their forces in broken terrain which the Germans had no opportunity to reconnoitre. The fighting continued to rage between Salaspils and the river until late on 7 December when there was a pause after which the Russians reinforced their lines. German officers on the scene were divided as to whether renewal of the attack could be successful. Those who argued for it were of the opinion that Russian morale was about to break.

There were also disagreements in the Russian command though at a higher level. The idea of giving up what was left of Riga remained unpalatable for the Tsar and his Court even though military opinion was much more inclined to give it up. This debate was the circle in which Russian morale really counted. The soldiers were still obedient to the decrees they received.

The same problem was emerging on the South West Front. Ivanov was still in command there and he had apparently good intelligence that the Austrians were planning to attack. This was not agreed by the subordinate Army commanders on the Front because they could detect no obvious preparations. Ivanov, however, started a debate as to what should be done if the enemy did take action. He

indicated that he would defend on his current lines and within his own command had started shifting reserves to the south to meet the perceived threat. Despite Ivanov's determination, STAVKA was not convinced this would work and on 9 December they started preparing contingency plans for a retreat into the Ukraine.



Figure 3: The South West Front had been quiet since the summer but in early December 1915 the Russians feared an attack. Map shows situation on 9 December 1915.

### The Balkans

The only movement on this front was in Albania and the far west of Serbia where the Allies continued to fall back in the face of the new advance by the Austro-Hungarian 5<sup>th</sup> Army. The inhabitants of Tirane watched on 9 December as the last of the Italians and Montenegrins passed through the city on their way south. If the Austrians came back it would be the third time the city had changed hands without a fight. The mayor declared himself dishonoured by the unwillingness of anybody to defend his city.

## The Near East

All the Ottoman Fronts were static and there seemed little promise of further action in the immediate future.

Townsend reconnoitred the defences of Baghdad personally on 8 December. He was impressed by the canals and other water obstacles which provided protection to the southern districts of the city. Back at his headquarters he fumed with frustration knowing an assault would be futile and casting an eye back at his long line of communications. If anything went wrong here then help would be a long time in coming.

## The Western Front

The British were building up their stocks again and the Chantilly Conference marked the first occasion when Haig felt able to leave his headquarters since taking command the previous month. While at Chantilly he told Joffre that his promotion had meant he had missed the recent trials of the tanks in England which he had hoped to observe personally. He promised the French a full report nonetheless as soon as he had been properly briefed himself.

## The Italian Front

The Italians continued to prepare the positions which they intended to hold through the winter. The mountains had been blanketed by snow and this had its usual effect of promoting stillness and silence.

At lower elevations there was still a bustle of activity but this was not felt at the higher altitudes where movement was always much more difficult. Cadorna was issued bulletins warning of an Austrian offensive on 8 and 9 December but few on the front line ever heard of such concerns. The profound quietness of the front made it impossible to truly believe that the Austrians might be up to something.

## Player Notes

CP:

- *East: The east is the only theatre of any activity worth mentioning again this turn. Whilst over the rest of the front I remain primarily static, my last attack against Riga succeeded in driving him out of the southern portion of the city. He has limited supply and manpower in the region and I wonder how much blood and supply he will be prepared to spend on holding actions here while I can continue to mass manpower and supply. He will not wish to relinquish the DM for Riga, but it might prove an inevitable loss in addition to losses accrued over time by his divisions. It is a bit of a Verdun scenario.*
- *Balkans: Another minor advance by the AH 5<sup>th</sup> Army into Albania. I am not seeking decisive battle, here, just buying a bit of space.*
- *West: Quiet.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Digging in. I fear the threat to Baghdad is becoming very real.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*

- *Italy: Quiet.*

### DM Summary – December 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	2	9						11	22	1052	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-						1	1	440	Good
Ottoman	-	-						-	-	57	Good
Bulgaria	-	-						-	-	15	Good
Central Powers	2	9						12	23	1544	
France	-	-						-	-	671	Good
Great Britain	-	-						-	-	227	Good
Russia	5*	4						-	9	683	Shaken – *Riga (S) lost
Italy	-	-						-	-	48	Good
Belgium	-	-						-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-						-	-	(32)	NA
Entente	5	4						-	9	1627	

AP: Another attack near Riga. This time the dice go my way and the loss ratio is 9:4 in favour of the Russians. This is a real battle of wills. Who will blink first?

It may be noted that the Russian DM is now higher than the French. This is going to have strategic effects as the game goes forward which is now more likely to diverge from the historic path. The Russians will have to save themselves from the consequences of a premature economic collapse and this will mean they will be ineffective on the Eastern Front for many months. I have been sending American supplies to Italy rather than Russia because Italy is going to have to do some of the work that Russia would otherwise have done. I won't need to do a Lake Naroch type offensive in 1916 (Russians versus Germans) and the Brusilov Offensive (versus Austrians) will be delayed so the Italians will make better use of the American supply. Romanian entry will likely be delayed as well.

The worse thing at present is that although I have engineered an Austrian offensive under Rule 22, I really don't want them to attack the Russians. I suspect that is what will happen. Arguably I should have retreated and forced an attack in Italy but I am reluctant to give up what is a strong part of the Russian line.

The logic of the Russian position in the face of incessant CP attacks is to withdraw, but if they do that they (the Russians) will be forced to attack later. It is tempting to keep defending because it uses less supply and often delivers good loss ratios. It is difficult to commit to one alternative or the other as the situation overall is highly balanced and Russia's pain is France's relief. I am uncertain what is best.