

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT117: 19 – 22 December 1915 (December 5)

General Situation

The Great War had many cultural impacts. One of the less appreciated consequences was the birth of environmentalism. This is sometimes traced to the wartime studies of Ernestine Schwindler a nature-loving resident of Augsburg. The war interrupted the round of country walks which she was accustomed to take with her friends many of whom were then serving with the German Army. In attempting to keep them up to date with the seasonal changes in their accustomed haunts, Schwindler became convinced that the forests were dying and it was due to the “stress” of the war.

In December 1915, Schwindler published in Munich a short book entitled *Bitter Woods* in which she described how several areas of forest in Bavaria were losing colour, the so called Pale Woods. She acknowledged that this effect was only seen in small patches of woodland but she warned that this would surely spread to the larger forests if the war continued and then all German forests would die. She became convinced her thesis was correct because her Army correspondents had told her the same thing was happening in France and Poland. This was not therefore a local phenomenon but one which affected the whole of Europe.

As a scientific study, *Bitter Woods* had many failings. Not least was the inability of Schwindler to identify any mechanism by which the war might cause a widespread dying off of forest. Certainly in France a tree had a good chance of being subject to high explosive but in Bavaria Schwindler could only point vaguely at the weapons factories in Munich and say they must be responsible somehow. Despite this Schwindler’s book was extremely influential and several scholars have subsequently argued that environmental concern became a way in which the German population could express their anxieties about the progress and consequences of the war in an acceptable way. It has sometimes been suggested that British animal-loving sentimentality worked to the same purpose.



Figure 1: The Pale Woods of Augsburg and Munich taken from the notebooks of Schwindler’s monograph published in December 1915.

The Western Front



Figure 2: The Christmas Present and the reconnaissance of the abandoned German front by the French Cavalry, 19 – 22 December 1915.

Falkenhayn had a major surprise in store for the Allies. He had concluded that in 1916 the Germans should conduct their main defence behind the Aisne River and so significantly shorten and straighten their front in France. This would mean abandoning significant tracts of French territory including the city of Reims.

The German movement began on 18 December and proceeded like clockwork. The German Armies had performed similar manoeuvres before and this also followed the prior pattern of leaving a thin screen behind to impede the French pursuit. This retreat was over 40 kilometres and that was more radical than previous German withdrawals on this front.

Joffre was aware of the German movement almost immediately. Prime Minister Asquith dubbed it Falkenhayn's Christmas Present to the French. The withdrawal extended through a front of over 140 kilometres from Roye (5-3.1012) to Reims opposite the French 10th, 7th, and 9th Armies. Joffre didn't want the pursuit to be any faster than in any previous case. The ground was hard with frosts and conditions seemed good for the cavalry. Between 21 and 22 December, four French Cavalry Divisions formed columns which probed the old German front and drove the enemy screens back wherever they were found. However, these units remained in close contact with the French infantry and their priority at this stage was to ensure that the Germans could not return to their old positions should the retreat have been a ruse. During these operations

sections of the German front between Ressons (5-3.1013) and Vic-pas-sur-Aisne (5-3.1114)¹ and between Braine (5-3.1315) and Fismes (5-3.1415) were cleared of their slight garrisons.

The Italian Front

There was nothing worthy of note occurring on the Italian Front. Both sides were training new recruits and repairing the losses units had suffered in recent fighting.

The Eastern Front

The disengagement of the two sides on the Eastern Front was notorious and a cause of huge suspicion among the Western Allies who were aghast at the implications of reports that the two sides' front lines were up to 100 kilometres apart. All kinds of fraternization had been seen in the neutral zones that separated the two armies. In some ways this was just the continuation of older seasonal patterns of warfare but it seemed distinctive compared to the close quarter contacts of the Armies in the West. That Russia might consider a separate peace was an increasing fear of Britain and France. Since the Russians had done more fighting than the French recently, these unjustified concerns were a cause of great annoyance and even anger to any Russians who heard of them.

There were exceptions to this live and let live mentality. At Riga the two sides continued to eyeball each other across the Dvina River. The Russians had been expecting a further attack on 18 December and for several days subsequently they were on high alert. The Germans, however, made no further moves for the moment.

The Austrians and Russians also watched each other at close range near Czernowitz and on the East Galician border. In light of the recent CondorOst attack, the Russians continued to strengthen their front here.



Figure 3: The Neutral Zone in Eastern Poland, 19 - 22 December 1915.

¹ The Aisne shifted its path northwards in the 16th Century leaving this once flourishing river port high and dry. By the 20th Century Vic's place name had become an unusual memorial to the bitter memory of a lost geography.

The Balkans

This front remained static except in Albania where the Austrians had reached Berat (7-6.0615) on the River Osum. The Italian 14th Division had now retreated as far as Valona where it was forming an all-round defence. Since the Austrians were outrunning their supplies it did not seem likely that the Italian defences at Valona would be tested in the near future.

The Near East

Even though the Near Eastern Fronts were all very inactive, the Turkish railways were working at full stretch keeping supplies moving and moving reserves and reinforcements between fronts. Compared to the capacity of European railroads these movements were limited and left nothing spare to cope with an emergency. Only one or two Divisions could be moved at any one time.

DM Summary – December 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	2	9	-	2	-			11	24	1054	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	6	-	-			1	7	446	Good
Ottoman	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	57	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	15	Good
Central Powers	2	9	6	2	-			12	31	1572	
France	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	671	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	227	Good
Russia	5*	4	1	2	-			-	12	686	Shaken – *Riga (S) lost
Italy	-	-	2	-	-			-	2	50	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-*	-	-			-	-	(32)	NA - *lost Tirane
Entente	5	4	3	2	-			-	14	1634	

Player Notes

- CP: East: My counter-battery fire resulted in equal exchange, which I think hurts him more as the defender than it does me as the attacker given the relative supply benefits using artillery on the defence. I will have to attack him within three turns. That is fine – I had intended to. I am railing extra troops and artillery to Riga to continue the assault there. The rest of the front straightens out and starts to dig in. He pulled back many of his Russian divisions last turn so my hope of concentrating against some of them in open ground will not happen without pulling me well out of position. What his move does allow me to do, however, is thin out some of my front to reinforce the Riga battle.*

- *Balkans: More gradual advance he AH 5th Army. It is going to be a quiet winter in the Balkans, I suspect, with a gradual inload of British troops coming through Greece.*
- *West: I suspect my WF moves will cause Robert a combination of immense surprise and some discomfort as I withdraw the 14th, 2nd and 3rd armies to a new line running from Peronne to just north of Reims. This shortens my line by a huge amount and anchors me along the Aisne. It allows me to concentrate my strength rather than risk him massing against an obvious weak point somewhere. It may appear to be a move driven by insanity, but it costs me no iron or coal even though it relinquishes control of Reims. There is no possibility of Germany threatening Paris at this stage and I deem it better to best configure myself for the long game. It also allows me to concentrate a little more against Russia to try and deliver some crippling blows there. This in turn may ease pressure on AH in the east and allow them to bolster themselves in the Balkans. It is also likely to force France and Britain into more offensive activity to assist their Russian allies.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet. I fully expect to see TE forces extracting from here for the Balkans to apply more pressure on AH without risking Russian DMs to do so.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

AP: I certainly was not expecting another major retreat on the Western Front. I am immediately suspicious of another attempt to draw the French forwards in order to attack them. I leave the French in their trenches and concentrate on destroying the abandoned German defences. There is no hurry.

In reviewing Entente plus points in 1915, I would remind myself that the major negative has been Russia. The positives are the converse and chiefly I would claim to be pleased with the conduct of the Western Front.

At the end of 1914, the French were in a terrible state and the British and Belgians were not much better having had to make sacrificial attacks in order to relieve the pressure on France. The Germans held more territory than historically and this was stretching my shipping close to its limits. I was doubtful how I could conduct the Western Front in 1915 without the French incurring dangerous losses given that they were already at 61% of Shaken Morale (552 DM) at the end of 1914. I feared most of all a renewal of German attacks in the West which never came leaving the initiative to me.

The CP's concentrations in the East therefore allowed me to time my attacks in the West and control their intensity without too much disruption. I am very surprised that I have got through a whole year and French DM only increased by about 120. I was particularly pleased with my offensives in March in Alsace and in November in Lorraine as they gained ground for very little cost and recovered a resource and increased German food deficits.

I obtained a few successes in the East apart from the indirect ones felt in the West. The surrender of Przemyśl would have been difficult for the Austrians to avoid once a siege had begun but it was still a considerable effort of the Russians to achieve this. The other Russian success has been the infliction of attrition on the Germans and to a lesser extent the Austrians. There were a lot of combats where the Russians extracted roughly equal losses from their assailants. This is what has tempted me to

keep the Russians engaged rather than hiding behind the Grave Threat Line. It has seemed better to fight defensive battles which do not have to be fully supplied rather than save myself for future offensives in which with Shaken Morale everything will stop when I run out of supply. With DM over 1050 I think the Germans are going to have to be more cautious in 1916 so I should again have more of the initiative.

There is not very much I can boast about in the Balkans. I have not hurt the CP there very much at all though I have a viable front which may start to contribute something in due course and especially once the Romanians get in.

The Italians have drawn a blank in two efforts on the Isonzo but made some progress in the Trentino which should make it difficult for the Austrians to push south to Verona at any future date. Italian advances were mostly due to initial weaknesses in the Austrian defences in the Trentino which are no longer there.

The only part of the campaign in the Near East which I am definitely pleased with is the Gallipoli attack. Without the costs of this campaign, Turkish DM would be barely 40 and I would have very little to show for the first year of war against the Ottoman Empire. The campaign at the Dardanelles is costly but British morale is not yet critical in any way and it has kept over 12 Turkish Divisions fixed in European Turkey making everything a bit easier on the other fronts. My chief fear here has been the possibility of a couple of German Divisions being sent to help the Turkish defences as they could protect the Turks against losses and therefore negate the whole reason for the campaign. I am not sure if Ivor realised he could do this or whether he was following a strict no distractions in the Near East policy. One of the reasons why I was unhappy about the early overrun of Serbia was that Germans could have been at Gallipoli in May 1915 and it would probably have been a short invasion. In fact, I almost made a last minute decision to shift the invasion to the Asian coast but in the end decided to risk the European side and that was probably the right choice.

The Caucasus campaign has been weakened by the bad situation of the Russians on the main Eastern Front. I cannot afford to be that aggressive and this will make it hard to reach Erzerum.

The Iraq campaign was difficult to get going. It looks impressive that I am already close to Baghdad but I cannot attack until the balance of force changes. There is nothing to say about the Egyptian situation. The game has barely begun there. Nevertheless I had low expectations of these fronts in 1915. That will not be the case next year.