

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT118: 23 – 27 December 1915 (December 6)

General Situation

The fighting at Riga during late 1915 had placed Latvian Nationalists into a quandary. First there was every prospect that their city would be devastated by prolonged fighting. Second it was unclear who would win this trial of strength. It had long been assumed that national development would have to come under the protection of Russia but increasingly since the start of the war a German option had come in to view. Some Latvian Nationalists had therefore initially welcomed the approach of the German army only to have second thoughts when the front line bisected their city.

Christmas had always been a significant time for Latvian patriots for by adhering to the Latin calendar they had distinguished themselves from Orthodox Russia. On 23 December, the head of the Lutheran Church in Riga had proposed a Christmas truce. Ludendorff took no notice.

The Western Front



Figure 1: Soissons liberated, 25 December 1915.

The Allied commanders on the Western Front made a concerted effort to ensure it was understood that there would be no truces and no fraternization during the Christmas season and French and British troops were trained to resist any temptation to join any festive singing across no-man's land.

Christmas still passed mostly peacefully in the West but rain and heavy winds dampened the spirits of those on duty in the trenches.

In the central part of the Western Front, the two sides were not in such close contact. The French were intent on liberating Soissons and on 25 December a column of Chasseurs of the 7th Cavalry Division pushed aside negligible opposition to reach the city. They were closely followed by a Red Cross convoy bringing food and medicine to the inhabitants. Next were film crews who recorded the devastation in the town for propaganda purposes. In truth it was no worse there than in any other place that was close to the fighting.

The Italian Front

The Italian Front also saw no significant combats and it did not seem that any were on the horizon.

The Eastern Front



Figure 2: The German attack at Riga, 24 December 1915.

Ludendorff was determined that the Battle for Riga should be renewed. However, his wishes were not shared so much in Army Group Riga which had recognised that the Russians on the north bank of the Dvina were digging in and gaining in strength. Ludendorff insisted however and three German Divisions, all first rate formations, were ordered to make an attempt to secure the warehouse and factory districts on 24 December.

Everyone on the German side could see it was an unpromising situation forced on them by a higher command that had lost sight of the reality on the ground which was that the Russians had all the bridges and crossing points in the city well covered. There was only one usable bridge, the Great Bridge of Riga which was so solidly built that no amount of dynamite could ever have brought it down. Even the shelling had only scratched it.

The northern end of the Great Bridge was close by the Lutheran Cathedral just off the main square in the city. The Germans intended to cross at midnight counting on surprise and aided by the Gothic towers and battlements along the length of the bridge which were already in German hands and would provide cover for the assault units which were selected from among the best infantry of the German 1st, 15th and 25th Divisions. These were ordered to stay in cover all the previous day to give the Russians no hint of what was to come.

Meanwhile the Lutheran Archbishop had announced to the remaining inhabitants of the city a Christmas vigil and at least two thousand civilians had gone that evening to the Cathedral. The Germans had not stopped this because they had wanted to keep out of sight and allow a sense of normality to prevail.

Around midnight when the Germans started their attack most of these civilians were still in the church and therefore rather close to the fighting. The sound of the firing had a varying effect on the people in the Cathedral. Most chose to stay inside but a stray shell caused a panic and a fire. This caused a rush for the doors. Outside, those fleeing started running into German soldiers and entreated them to stop fighting and help put out the fire. Some were caught up with a religious spirit and holding hands, praying and singing almost blocked the north end of the Great Bridge. Several fell victims to bullets but this large group did not seem to notice.

The appearance of a large number of civilians on the battlefield and the dramatically spreading fire in the Cathedral changed the whole situation. The German attack had not gained any surprise. Their initial wave had suffered heavy losses as they tried to penetrate the factory district. The responsible officers already knew it was hopeless. From the bridge, where the chaos caused by the fire was most apparent, an order came forward calling off the whole operation.

The Russians were close enough to see what was going on and ceased firing. They shouted to the Germans to go back and put out the fire and then sent a fire engine of their own to the bridge under cover of a white flag. The Russians also reopened a pumping station by the river for which they had the keys. The commander of the German 1st Division had been in Belgium in 1914 and he didn't want to be responsible for another Louvain and he ordered his men to stop fighting too.

By 0300 hours the Cathedral fire was under control (though the damage was severe) and it was realised that Latvians, Germans and Russians had all helped stop what they had started. They continued to work together until mid-morning and cooperated in taking care of the casualties and the wounded. The Archbishop, delighted to have the truce he had asked for, served hot drinks to all at noon and only as the sun went down did the soldiers disperse back to their own positions.

After the war, the Great Bridge was renamed the Peace Bridge. Each Christmas subsequently there has been a "Hands across the Dvina" ceremony. In communist times this was somewhat devalued as

state propaganda and stripped of its religious elements.¹ More recently it has become a popular jamboree still retaining a strong anti-war message.

The Balkans

The Greek government had noted that recent movements by the Central Powers had brought their forces closer to their own borders again and they were monitoring the situation. For instance a report to the Greek Minister of Defence on 27 December had intelligence that the Austrians in Albania were settling back in to camps in the Shkumbin Valley. It also gave an assessment that there were now three Turkish Divisions near the Thracian frontier. Finally an increase in Allied supplies moving through Salonika was verified. At some future date these different forces would be in collision and Greece might have to choose sides.

The Near East



Figure 3: The Royal Navy Division clears the Gully Ravine, 27 December 1915.

The forces facing each other on the Gallipoli peninsula were enduring a miserable winter. Many assumed that the campaign was over until the spring and perhaps over altogether. After weeks of inactivity some decline in discipline was inevitable and the Turkish defenders were less watchful than they might have been.

In this context, Munro thought he might secure a final success through an unexpected attack. To this end the Royal Navy Division was set to clear the last section of the so-called Gully Ravine west of the Turkish position at Krithia (7-6.3812) that had defied all French and British assaults since the start of the campaign. This attack on 27 December was successful in so far as it achieved its objective in the

¹ The Soviets also replaced the ancient medieval bridge with a modern one in the 1960s.

Ravine at the expense of the Turkish 7th Division. However, to win this result a diversionary attack on Krithia was still needed and the British losses there were no less dreadful than in most prior attacks. Everything attempted in this narrow battlefield boiled down to a frontal attack.

DM Summary – December 1915

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	2	9	-	2	-	3		11	27	1057	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	6	-	-	-		1	7	446	Good
Ottoman	-	-	-	-	-	1		-	1	58	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	15	Good
Central Powers	2	9	6	2	-	4		12	35	1576	
France	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	671	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	-	-	4		-	4	231	Good
Russia	5*	4	1	2	-	1		-	13	687	Shaken – *Riga (S) lost
Italy	-	-	2	-	-	-		-	2	50	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-*	-	-	-		-	-	(32)	NA - *lost Tirane
Entente	5	4	3	2	-	5		-	19	1639	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Against my will and due to my ill-conceived artillery attack earlier, I am forced to attack at Riga. He is very heavily concentrated SE of Riga, so I attack into the urban centre even though it will halve my attack strength. It will prove costly but far less so than if I had attacked SE of the city. Nothing else occurs along the front.*
- *Balkans: Quiet.*
- *West: Robert has, unsurprisingly, commented on the apparent rashness of my withdrawal along a swathe of the WF; suggesting I am incurring a greater food penalty. I was earning no food in France anyway, so I don't believe it will affect that. The only places for me to get food now are in the east, but that also entails occupation of too many personnel centres to provide a surplus. The great risk for me in France was being too thinly spread. In some locations I had no more than 15SP defending. That makes a very tempting target and is easy to quickly mass force, including artillery, against. My Germans have realised that there is no further ground to be gained on the WF; not unless I could move sufficient forces from the east and that will not happen whilst Russia*

is still in the fight. Shortening my lines in winter to allow me to concentrate force and start building trenches now seemed the sensible strategy at this point.

- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet; although I see force concentrations building up behind the Isonzo line so expect an attack here in the future.*

AP: There is something of a chess-like quality to WWI strategy as depicted by DWK. In chess you can only move one piece at a time but every chess-move is also potentially an attack. In DWK you can move all your pieces every turn but attack is much more restricted due to the shortage of supply and the disastrous consequences of launching combats without sufficient supply, morale or numerical superiority. This means that (after the first few months in 1914) the whole game play becomes very subject to trade-offs and the chance that you will be doing more than one significant “move – attack” at any one time is much reduced.

At the moment I am like a chess-player who has got a decent structure up front in most places but a little weak on my right (the East). I don't want very much to happen before I can bring up some major pieces from the back and these will most easily fit in to reinforce my stronger left (the West). In DWK I need supplies and reinforcements to make my 1916 offensive as massive as possible and there is no reason to hurry it either as attacking prematurely will free the Germans from the threat.² I am not that worried he can strengthen his defences because they are already strong and the extra strength he gains in the interim has to be spread out whereas I can choose the point of concentration.

Ivor's retreat in France is also chess-like. It is deliberate and is a trade-off in the sense he is balancing his efforts in the West against the East. Shortening the front does also cause me difficulty and will mean that when I next attack his lines the Allied losses will be worse. This is not the first voluntary retreat made and there are good historical precedents for this in WWI.

I did query this particular move primarily on food deficit grounds. I thought the Germans were getting 1 surplus food a month from France and they will not do so after I occupy the terrain given up. That will increase the German food deficit.

I don't actually think the CP should let food deficit dictate strategy too much because it is a factor which they cannot easily shift without great efforts which are likely to be more costly than the deficit itself. However, a voluntary loss of food should always give pause to thought if only because it is so hard to win back. The food problem does mean that it is generally to the CP advantage to push the pace of the game but even this is not an absolute and both sides have a major incentive to try and win before the end of 1918 anyway as they will only draw if the game goes in to 1919 and their major powers – Germany or France or Britain – are at Economic Collapse.

It is actually very hard to judge what effect this retreat in France will have on the game in the longer term. There are a lot of consequences in any change in the position of the front line in France. It is a good quality of DWK that it has found a way to make this critical so that the players should care

² *The Americans are a factor. I want to get them in and that is likely to depend on exposing the Germans to some sustained fighting over several months.*

about what happens sometimes at the scale of a single hex. Troop density and food have been mentioned. If I recover Reims the French will have another personnel point per month but will have to import more food themselves. The more resources including food the Germans occupy in France the more pressure they put on Allied shipping. On this I do not claim to know when a crunch point might be reached and whether or not I have anything to worry about. There is also the Rule 22 factor. Ivor seems to be assuming that the French will attack in the West before the Germans. That depends partly on what happens in the East where the Germans are still consuming supply. The fighting at Riga may be a substitute for Verdun. I can only stop that by giving up Riga. So it is chess-like in the sense that a simple shift in position has ramifications which roll through the long duration of the game and interlink with what occurs on the opposite side of the board.

Merry Xmas.