

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT121: 6 – 9 January 1916 (Jan 2)

General Situation

At the first approach of the German Army to Riga in the summer of 1915, the Russians had raised a Division of Latvian volunteers loyal to the Tsar. By New Year, this unit had been trained and was mustering at Minsk where it formed a reserve for the West Front along with a Polish Volunteer Brigade.

At Riga the situation at the end of the first week in January was becoming critical. Another German attack was expected and the inhabitants expected a further battle to destroy their city completely. A procession to the fire damaged cathedral on 7 January turned into a political demonstration more or less between the opposing lines. German sponsored agitators were accused of spreading anti-war and anti-Russian sentiments and placards started appearing denouncing the Tsar and demanding the Russians went home. The Russian military authorities removed all manifestations of disloyalty as soon as they appeared but there were rumours of a Latvian rebellion for several days until on 8 January the country districts to the east of the city erupted as Latvian peasants took over the estates of absentee landlords. Although there were few left-socialists in Latvia, Lenin always gave Riga the honour of being acknowledged the first place to start a proper Revolution.

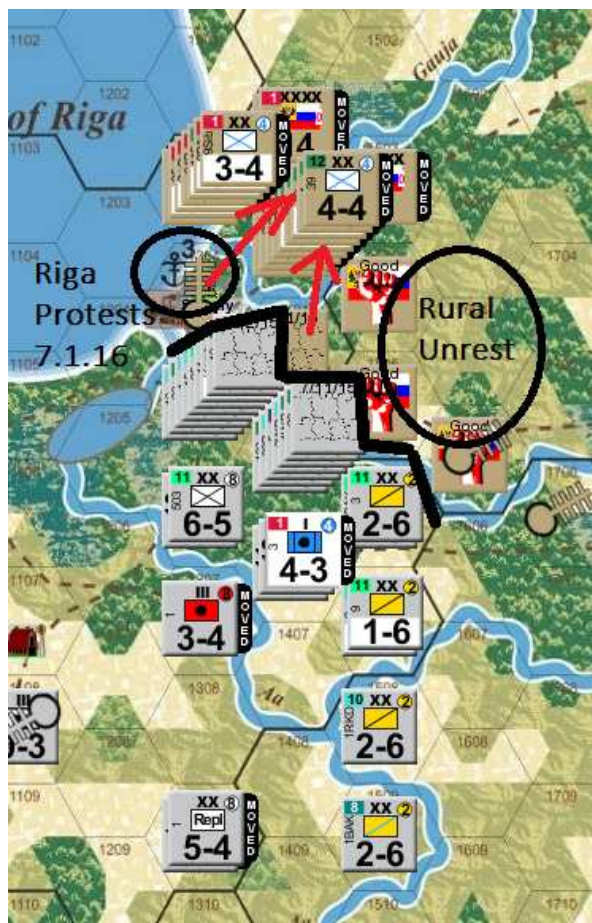


Figure 1: The Russians withdraw from Riga as Latvian unrest spreads 7 - 9 January 1916.

The trouble in the rural areas was a problem for the Russian 12th Army which had concentrated close to Riga in order to protect it from the expected German attack. Its commander asked STAVKA what to do in view of the fact that the two Russian Armies in and around Riga depended on a single rail line for their supplies and the country to the rear was showing signs of hostility. Unlike the Tsar, STAVKA was not so concerned to defend Riga to the last man and, while apparently seeking an order from the Imperial commander-in-chief, actually authorised a retreat. The Tsar was told that suppression of the Latvian peasants so close to the front would be politically and militarily dangerous and he was forced to acquiesce in allowing the Russian 1st and 12th Armies to pull back. By 9 January, the last Russians had left Riga.

The Eastern Front

The evacuation of Riga was a difficult operation particularly as the Russians had heavy guns in the city which were hard to extract as they ponderously moved north on icy and muddy roads.

The German Army Group Riga was aware by the evening of 9 January that the Russians were leaving. They were well aware of the disaffection of the Latvian peasantry as they had promoted it wherever they had been able. Some of the senior officers there and at OberOst had disapproved of supporting the expropriation of land as it seemed a dangerous precedent but some of the more political officers were quickly announcing that this sort of rural unrest might spread across the whole of Eastern Lithuania and Poland. Riga was a great success for this political orientation because it was widely recognised that military means could only have gained the city by starting another blood-bath.

The remainder of the Eastern Front continued to be inactive.

The Balkans

The South Balkan front was also very quiet. It snowed heavily in Skopje and Monastir on 7 – 8 January.

The Near East

On 8 January, the long expected evacuation of the Dardanelles bridgeheads began. On that day, the British 28th Division was lifted off the beaches at Sulva Bay (7-6.3711). The remainder of the Allied units at Sulva Bay moved south to join the forces at Beach 3712. Had the Turks wished to occupy the old Allied positions at Sulva Bay they could easily have done so. Next day, the French started withdrawing from Cape Hellas (7-6.3713) and only their Marine Brigade and a skeleton of their corps headquarters remained ashore at the end of that day.

The remaining non-French Allied forces at the Dardanelles then became concentrated in the narrow bridgehead around Beach 3712. The 2nd Australian Division had been given the task of ensuring the Turks did not try and interfere with the embarkation on the ships and someone¹ had decided that attack was the best form of defence. For two days between 8 and 9 January, the Australians battled with the Turkish 19th Division over a small hillock which had once been an Australian position overlooking Krithia (7-6.3812). On 8 January, an Australian raiding party went onto this prominence. In neighbouring units a rumour circulated that a sergeant had left a suitcase in a dugout there and

¹ Munro had to take responsibility but he always maintained that he had never required such active operations in the last days of the bridgehead.

had led a platoon back to recover his property. The first group was driven back by a swift Turkish counterattack and it seemed the suitcase had not been found. A few hours later a popular captain in the Melbourne Rifles took a company back out to the old position and had another attempt to find the suitcase. By this time the Turks were alert. Mustafa Kemal himself supervised a second Turkish counterattack which drove the Australians away before they could complete their search.

This pattern continued through the following night and by next morning Australian units as big as a battalion were moving forward in a desperate effort to get control of the high ground long enough to find the suitcase. By this time the Turks knew from prisoners what the Australians' objective was and in one or two instances the Turkish infantry taunted their adversaries with any large Ottoman bag or satchel they had at hand.



Figure 2: Evacuation and covering attacks, Gallipoli, 8 - 9 January 1916.

No-one stopped to wonder whether a suitcase was a very military piece of equipment. The honour of the Australians was satisfied when, late on 9 January, it was heard that a final attack had captured the old dugout and pulled out the precious piece of luggage just in time to get it away before the Turks overran the hillock for the last time. This combat had just added again to the already excessive losses of the Australians at Gallipoli but at least this fight was one they had chosen for themselves. The suitcase itself disappeared from history without further trace. Except in later years Mustafa Kemal, when post-war leader of Turkey, liked to show off a large trunk. It had labels on it from

Sydney, Brisbane and Suez and he maintained that this was the famous suitcase which the Turks had never lost. It can now be seen in the National Museum in Ankara.

In Mesopotamia, Townsend's frustration in front of Baghdad was becoming uncontrollable. Having excluded all other options, the British commander decided to test the Turks against a movement on the eastern side of the city. This was unlikely to provoke any reaction from the defenders who watched impassively from their positions. There were reinforcements on their way to Baghdad from the Caucasus and Syria so time was on the side of the Turks.

In London and France there was a lot of impatience with the campaigns in the Near East. The Russians were clearly doing nothing in the Caucasus, the withdrawal from the Dardanelles was a huge embarrassment, and Townsend had little prospect of taking Baghdad. The Westerners were vindicated so it seemed.



Figure 3: Townsend manoeuvres around Baghdad, 8 - 9 January 1916.

The Western Front

The long lull continued though Joffre started to pay some attention to Sarrail's concern that the French 3rd Army was about to suffer an attack close to the Moselle River. A couple of Reserve Divisions were dispatched to Sarrail's command to placate him. On other parts of the front, the French air service was ordered to watch carefully for any preparations for a German offensive.

In January 1916, the French were also in the process of reorganising their cavalry. Two Divisions (7th and 8th Cavalry) were converted into dedicated mobile infantry units.

The Italian Front

The innovations in which the Italians and Austrians placed most faith were from their artillery. This was largely because both sides were conscious that a deadlock had arisen and the weapon which they most missed was the heavy gun. The Italians had relatively few large howitzers and they had

only expanded their capability slightly since the start of the war. The Austrians had seen the potential of mountain artillery but it would take a long time before large numbers could reach the front.

DM Summary – January 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	-						10	10	1067	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-						2	2	448	Good
Ottoman	-	1						-	1	59	Good
Bulgaria	-	-						-	-	15	Good
Central Powers	-	1						12	13	1589	
France	-	-						-	-	671	Good
Great Britain	-	4						-	4	235	Good
Russia	-	-						NA	-	687	Shaken
Italy	-	-						-	-	50	Good
Belgium	-	-						NA	-	(96)	NA
Serbia	-	-						NA	-	(32)	NA
Entente	-	4						-	4	1643	

Player Notes

- *CP: East: This is one of the overall quietest turns from my side for a long time. All I am doing on the EF is building up strength around Riga and digging in; although the AH advance to positions deeper in Russia in order to protect food resources is, of course, a significant undertaking.*
- *Balkans: No developments with no feasible opportunity to conduct offensive operations. It probably behoves me to remain defensive on this front given that it is the only way to get the Serbs to expend supply and the terrain favours the defence.*
- *West: This is another front where it will take a major error on Robert's part to leave him vulnerable enough to be attacked. It is going to be a long winter of assimilating RPLs into the armies.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet; although I note the gradual increase in British force elements with alarm. Baghdad is under genuine threat.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: Remarkable; another attack by Robert. I suspect he is both burning British supply to avoid a wasteful offensive somewhere else and weakening my TU forces to reduce their ability to conduct any attacks against a rearguard action on evacuation.*
- *Italy: Quiet. I await the blow on the Isonzo. Will he do it in winter, I wonder.*

AP: I had to withdraw from Riga. The German concentration there is fearsome. Sure the Russians would have lots of advantages but the Germans would be capable of a 100+ combat strength attack next turn or the turn after and the Russians cannot take that sort of punishment any longer. It is a morale driven decision and a very painful one. A small comfort to me is the knowledge that the Germans can only take Riga once and I will not be tied to its defence any longer.

I had to withdraw from Gallipoli because there is nothing more I can do there. I want to preserve some of my forces in order to redeploy elsewhere in the Near East/Balkans. Unfortunately for the Australians, I have replacements I can use so another cynical attack went in to make up for my frustration at being able to attack nowhere else in the Near East.