

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT125: 23 – 27 January 1916 (January 6)

General Situation

The Imperial Conference at Potsdam on 24 January was held in complete secrecy. It was a German only affair. There are now no surviving minutes but it was referred to in the memoirs of some participants including Ludendorff. It is clear that Falkenhayn sought to avoid a debate developing between those who advocated action in one direction or another. He considered that it was the prerogative of the General Staff to make such decisions and he was wary of allowing discussion of these options. Instead he appealed to the German military elite to consider the long-term plight of the German Empire.

Falkenhayn confirmed that Germany had 98 Infantry Divisions available for front line service on the Western Front and 38 currently on the Eastern Front. He revealed that the German Army assessment was that there were between 140 and 150 French and British Infantry Divisions on the Western Front, so more than the whole German Army. It was this concentration of enemy military power which was the most dangerous for Germany and he argued that a successful outcome of the war required that the Western powers be brought into some degree of submission to German will.

A paper by the German Navy advocated a more aggressive policy at sea and called for unrestricted submarine warfare. Falkenhayn also allowed this motion a lot of time for discussion though the diplomatic problems of submarine warfare precluded any immediate initiative on this.

Nothing could really conceal the fact that Falkenhayn was unwilling to confirm specific plans at that time. The conference was supposed to address the diplomatic opportunities which might be opening up in Russia but even this was not pursued. Falkenhayn and Ludendorff agreed on this, jointly asserting that it was too early for any definite course to be determined and the Russians would have to offer clearer concessions and a break of their alliance with France and Britain before there could be a basis of peace.

The Near East

The Turkish Army in Baghdad was losing discipline. It would be wrong to suggest that the city was anything other than a shadow of its former glory and the few opportunities for hedonistic pleasure were well hidden in the narrow alleys of the ancient metropolis.

The body rots from the head and the commander of the 6th Army, Halil Bey became completely fatalistic after the failure of the attack at Al A'Zamiyah (7-9.3021) and no further orders were issued from his headquarters while his subordinates began slowly looting the city they were supposed to defend.

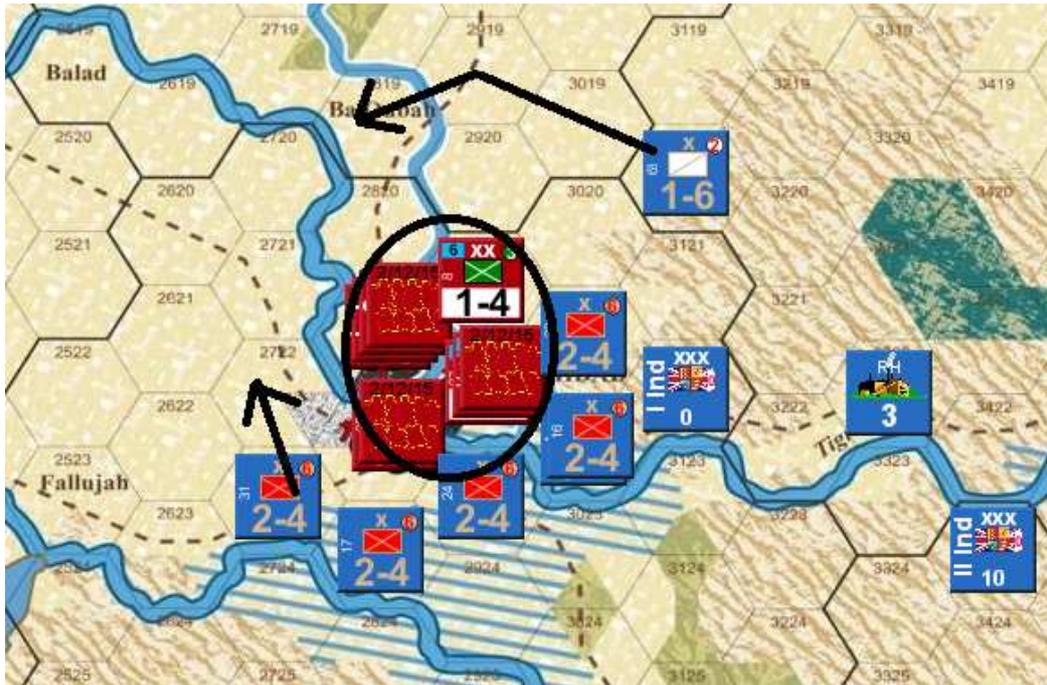


Figure 1: Townsend's sketch plan, 24 January 1916 (from the von der Goltz Family Archive).

Von der Goltz, the German adviser could see clearly what was going to happen. Indeed through a well-placed spy (thought to be Townsend's Indian orderly) he was actually able to produce an authentic copy of the British general's plan and presented this to Halil Bey on 24 January. A sketch reputedly taken from Townsend's own travelling desk, showed the Indian cavalry circling far to the north of Baghdad and seizing the town of Ba Qubah from where they would be able to stop all communication up the Tigris. Another column of Indian infantry was shown coming across from the Euphrates and taking the railway station at Kadhimain (7-9.2722).

Despite this convincing evidence of enemy intentions, von der Goltz could not get Halil Bey to climb down from the comfortable diwan on which he reclined and take control of the situation. Instead he simply clapped his hands for another round of fine dishes and dancing girls. The self-styled King of Baghdad confined himself to declaring that the Mongols would be defeated by the strong walls of the city and the only mistake that could be made was to encounter their cavalry on the open field.

Von der Goltz would not accept this passivity and realised that Halil Bey was no longer in effective control. He went first to the headquarters of the 35th Division which was the strongest unit in the Turkish Army. The Divisional commander was absent and no one knew where he was. Von der Goltz found instead the Colonel commanding the 98th Regiment and persuaded him to move his regiment to Kadhimain where the German officer feared the British would attack. As soon as he had managed to improve the situation in western Baghdad, von der Goltz went to work on some of the units in the north east of the city. It was not hard to get a cavalry Brigade to ride off in the direction of Ba Qubah as that could be seen as an escape from disaster. It was harder to move the Turkish 8th Division and some Mosul Jandarma to blocking positions outside the city and the German had to lead them personally on a perilous night march to forestall the predicted British advance.

These dispositions were mostly successful and Townsend never had the opportunity to execute his grand encirclement of Baghdad. Nevertheless the move on Kadhimain (7-9.2722) was made on 25

January and the Turkish 98th Regiment came under attack from the Indian 31st and 17th Brigades the next morning. Townsend's force was now being resupplied and ammunition was carried forwards as quickly as possible. However, the operation was all a bit improvised and the Indian infantry were pinned down in open ground. The attack got nowhere. The Turkish 98th Infantry Regiment stood firm and von der Goltz' hurried deployment had saved the day.



Figure 2: The attack at Kadhimain, 26 January 1916.

The Western Front

It was now more than two months since there had been a major combat on the Western Front. Most units on both sides were reequipped and most were at or close to full strength. New recruits had been absorbed into formations which had taken losses the previous autumn. Training was systematic. Trench lines were refurbished and subject to few gaps. It only required the generals to once more set these gigantic forces in motion for there to be another cataclysmic clash of modern armies. But for the moment there was little sign this was imminent.

The Italian Front

The great snowstorm was hardly over when, on 23 January, Boroevic launched an attack in the Eastern Dolomites with the cream of the Tyrolese and Croatian mountain infantry. The sector of the front attacked was near the high Alpine village of Misurina (6-4.2715) where the Italian 2nd Infantry Division had outposts which were busy digging themselves out of snowdrifts when the Croat 13th Mountain Brigade came over the crest of the road from Schulterbach (6-4.2714). By the end of the day, all the Italian infantry in the upper valley had been overrun and the defence was driven back toward Cortina (6-4.2715) where the Italians had the 8th Alpine Brigade in reserve.

The winter combat in the mountains continued through the following days but the Austrians were not able to make any further gains quickly. Both sides were impeded by the snow. On 26 January, the Carnic Corps reported from its headquarters at Tai di Cadore (6-4.2716) that the troops on the

frontline were running short of ammunition and no fresh supplies had got through to them. Boroevic had also signalled that he wanted to continue the attack but it would take some days before his mountain infantry could get into position to expose the weaknesses of the Italian deployments.



Figure 3: The Austro-Hungarians attack in the Eastern Dolomites, 23 - 27 January 1916.

The Eastern Front

There was a major incident of indiscipline in the Russian Army between 25 – 27 January which took place among units of the 2nd and 7th Armies in Eastern Lithuania. The record of this is unclear but it seems that a kind of military strike took place and soldiers who had been resting refused orders to return to work on a line of defences owing to very cold conditions. Those in the front who heard that their reliefs were not coming back to the line then walked out in defiance of their officers and returned to the more comfortable camps to the rear. These actions were taken without violence and even with the misplaced sympathy of some junior officers. It is unlikely this would have occurred if the Germans had been closer but it would be impossible to underestimate how damaging this kind of thing was to any kind of military order and responsibility. The political decay of the Russian Empire was showing more and more.

The Balkans

The Austro-Hungarian 5th Army was still in motion and by 24 January it had swung forward into Eastern Albania and the area to the south of Lake Ohrid. This was the region of the Serbian National Redoubt during the previous summer but now the Austrians found it abandoned.

On 26 January, units of the French 34th Division started debarking at Kavalla. There were three Turkish Divisions reported to be massed on the Greek border 32 kilometres to the east of this port. The French announced they were there to protect Greek territorial integrity which was to say they were supporting the very recent Greek take-over of this region. There were Royalist Greek forces in and around Kavalla who were unsure what to make of the French arrival. Most of the ordinary soldiers were indifferent and the confusion was greatest for the Corps Commander and civil authorities who were ordered to provide the French with no assistance but merely to tolerate their presence.

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: 10th Army starts to dig in at Riga and pushes cavalry out to the flanks whilst the rest of the front continues to dig in or consolidate. I have the two reserve armies still heading south to determine where best to employ them.*
- *Balkans: The AH 5th Army starts to conduct a relief in place with the Bulgarian 1st Army to allow the AHs to position themselves closer to railheads and place the Bulgarian west flank on occupation duties in Albania. This will allow me to make better use of the stronger AH force.*
- *West: Quiet.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: My attack had the worst possible outcome; a 1 in 6 chance of failing utterly and it did. My situation is now more perilous than ever as I lost the best part of a Division with my sortie. Relief is desperately needed in Baghdad.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Gallipoli: This front no longer applies and will no longer be discussed in this narrative.*
- *Italy: AH needs to attack to accord with Conrad's diktats so they started to position the 6th (Mt) Army last turn to attack in the Alps. This will use 5 supply and at best result in the destruction of an Italian brigade; but by attacking here it should at least prevent too high a loss on my part.*

AP: I continue my strict defensive policy. The Austrian attack in the Alps is an awkward one to defend as I cannot get supply or fresh troops to the threatened hex until next turn so I risk losing it. Even so defending is better than attacking in this terrain and I am getting the dividend of the Rule 22 pressure on the CP.

The strike of the Russians in Eastern Lithuania is a retreat of one hex intended to deny the Germans a chance to mass against part of the Russian line. It is a reflection of the extreme aversion to combat with Germans which the Russians will now show.

The current exception to my defensive policy is Iraq. It has dawned on me during the last couple of turns that I now have an unexpected chance to capture Baghdad before the floods hit (in 6 – 12 turns time). I have supply now arriving and a fresh Division will be in action in about 3 turns. This will change the balance of force around the city before the Turkish reinforcements arrive. At the start of this turn, the Turks had 8 SP (not counting HQ) to defend the city (reduced from 10 SP because of the recent Turkish attack). This was adequate while my force consisted of only 11 SP and 1 supply point but it will not be sufficient if I can start to reduce the defence further as my attack this turn is intended to do. My movements around the city threatening encirclement have also forced the defending Turks to leave their entrenchments and spread out.

I do not think this weakness at Baghdad was necessary. It probably would have only taken a couple of extra Turkish Divisions to be sent to this front a month or two sooner to block all Allied efforts to get to Baghdad before the floods. The size of the Allied force is strictly limited by logistics and at Baghdad they are reduced by the length of the LOC. The Turkish withdrawal to Baghdad made good sense and even a slightly larger defending force would have made attack impossible and the likely result of the floods would have been an Allied retreat.

This confirms the vulnerability of the Turkish southern fronts if they are not kept up to sufficient strength. The Palestine front is more vulnerable than the Iraq one because of its greater width. The Turks build 2 REPL per month on their own resources. They will get progressively weaker under even low levels of attrition unless they get weapon points from German or Austria (they have so far 61 DM in a period in which they have had 30 Turkish REPL SP). Since there is a delay in production and further delay in getting new units or replacements to these distant fronts it is essential that support is given to Turkey well before it is needed.