

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT130: 13 – 16 February 1916 (February 4)

General Situation

After long weeks of calm the German attacks, which began on the Western Front on 13 February, should have been a shock to the Western Allies. Haig's headquarters admitted that there had been heavy fighting in Flanders. Joffre was recorded in moving pictures apparently shrugging his shoulders at news of the German attack in Lorraine. He then headed off for lunch at a pretty auberge which cooked his favourite galettes. Since the High Commands gave off an air of nonchalance, the British and French public refused to be alarmed at the news of the enemy offensive. It did not look like a drive on Paris which might have caused greater concern.

The Western Front



Figure 1: The German 16th Army attack in Flanders, 13 - 14 February 1916.

On Sunday, 13 February 1916, the French 13th Division was deployed behind the River Meurthe in trenches covering Baccarat (5-3.2519). It had enjoyed a fairly quiet war to date and since early September 1914 there had been no significant movement of the front. At dawn the French poilus were awakened by the crashing sound of siege howitzers smashing up their trenches. After a short bombardment, the artillery fire was followed by probing infantry assaults which the French nevertheless kept back owing to the difficulties the Germans had crossing water obstacles and in subduing the outlying defensive works which were defended bravely.

The same day and at the same time, the German 16th Army attacked the junction of the British and Belgian Armies in Flanders between Noordschoote and Zuydschoote (5-3.0906). This required a crossing of the Canal de Yser à Ypres. The German technique was much the same as in Lorraine but here the infantry attack was much greater and developed faster. This was necessary because the Allied front in this sector was not defended by a single Infantry Division but by two Belgian and four British Divisions. Two of the British Divisions (56th Irish and 54th) had only arrived in this area two

days previously having marched up to support the British 1st Army from Dunkirk where they had newly debarked from England.

This German attack had an early success when the Belgian 5th Division was smashed to pieces trying to defend the Yser line on 13 February against overwhelming force. Haig ordered the 1st Army to go to the aid of the Belgians unreservedly and this meant that the fresh green Divisions were committed almost as soon as they had unpacked their kit. The British counterattacks which aimed to secure the integrity of the Allied line were mostly successful over the next two days though both sides suffered fearsome losses. The German assault troops were subject to many casualties traversing open country along the narrow paths afforded for ease of movement in this wet country. On 15 February, Haig ordered the Canadian Corps to move north and prepare to assist the British 1st Army if the Germans kept up their attacks. 1st Army was also the British command with fewest heavy guns and by 16 February Haig had corrected this, again by assigning newly arrived units fresh to the Continent.

Compared with the German attack in November at Armentières, the British Army performed noticeably better in this first combat of 1916. Above all there was sufficient ammunition for the field guns to fire more or less continuously (which caused the Germans great aggravation) and these stocks were immediately replaced from reserves.

Joffre also reacted positively to the German attack in Lorraine. There was much debate at GQG whether this could really be the main German effort since the 13th Division had been able to hold off the German attacks without assistance until, on 15 February, it was relieved by local reserves of the French 2nd Army. Despite suspecting that this was a feint, Joffre was persuaded by subordinates to use this as an opportunity to trial their railway reinforcement scheme which was implemented on 15 – 16 February. The railway net in Eastern France had been designed with exactly this kind of manoeuvre in mind and in consequence Joffre was able to move no less than six Divisions (including the strong V Corps) to the Lorraine front within less than 48 hours of the decision to do so.



Figure 2: The German 6th Army attack near Bacarat, 13 - 16 February 1916.

The Italian Front

There was suddenly a rush of movement on the Italian side of the front. The reserves which Cadorna had pulled out of the Isonzo front were sent marching toward the Eastern Dolomites. A few had the luxury of travel on the mountain railways. Other units from the Italian 4th Army were being sent in this direction also from the Western Dolomites.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this activity was that Cadorna was not going to take the loss of Cortina (6-4.2715) lying down. The Italian press had been very critical of this defeat and clearly Cadorna was responsive to public opinion much though he habitually denied it.

The Eastern Front

The German reconnaissance in force was now sweeping down through Belorussia. On 14 February, they were back in Baranovichi (4-5E.0216). The Russian withdrawal was spreading south and it was now joined by the Russian 10th Army which started pulling back north of the Pripet Marshes. The Russian 4th Army which was deepest in the swamp was also making preparations to retreat.

The Balkans

A multi-national Allied force consisting of British, French and Serbians began crossing the lower Crna River on 15 February and occupied Viničani (7-6.1409) the following day. This appeared to be the start of a move which might challenge the Bulgarian forces covering Skopje further north.

The Near East



Figure 3: Townsend tries the other flank at Baghdad, 15 - 16 February 1916.

Townsend finally got the opportunity to attack near Baghdad. As the effort around the western side had failed at Kadhmain (7-9.2722), and as a direct assault had proved impractical, the only alternative remaining was a sweep around the eastern side of the city. It was not until 16 February that the Indian 4th Division had been got in position and not until then that the British had found the extreme end of the Turkish line extended well into the desert as far as Nahrawan (7-9.3020). In the event, the Indian infantry pushed aside the Turkish infantry relatively easily and two Indian Brigades

(16th and 23rd) moved forward swiftly following the Turkish withdrawal which was covered by the enemy cavalry. Nevertheless while this desert fight was progressing the Turkish garrison of Baghdad was increasing by the day.

In the Caucasus, Yudenitch was creating a reserve in the Aras Valley. In mid-February, the Turks were cautiously moving forward in the Coruh Valley retaking ground which the Russians had given up.

DM Summary – February 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	-	-	21				12	33	1100	Good
Austria-Hungary	2	-	-	-				1	3	454	Good
Ottoman	3	-	-	1				-	4	66	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-				-	-	15	Good
Central Powers	5	-	-	22				13	40	1634	
France	-	-	-	2				-	2	673	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	9				-	9	246	Good
Russia	2	-	-	-				-	2	714	Shaken
Italy	-	-	-	-				-	-	53	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	(4)				-	(4)	(100)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-	-				-	-	(32)	NA
Entente	2	-	-	11				-	13	1678	

Player Notes

- CP: *East: I have started to dispatch some AH Engineers westwards to assist with developing defences. The pressing issue for me is to manoeuvre my AH armies into a favourable position to be able to attack and expend supply. Robert and I have agreed that the attack to maintain mandated upper levels of supply must be made within the month, which I think makes sense. It remains an onerous proposition though when the enemy knows you have to conduct an offensive and configure to maximise your casualties. I will have to attack with AH and it will hurt. I can rapidly rebuild with all of the RPLs I have but it is the DMs I am trying to keep down.*
- *Balkans: It has entailed a frustrating bit of lateral movement in the mountains in winter to move the AH 5th Army into a more central position in the Balkans where they can attack British or French forces rather than Serbian. Attacking the Serbs is a zero sum game. Early in the war it has to be done to occupy most of Serbia but you cannot eliminate the Serb threat – they will always bounce back over time by withdrawing deep into Greece; unless you can cut them off which would entail a dreadful blunder by the opponent. The terrain allows a retreating enemy to conduct an orderly withdrawal through the most*

awful terrain; and then the CP start to outrun their rail supply lines. This is now the most multinational front in the war; comprising all of the AH nations, Turks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Italians, British and French forces.

- *West: I need to give the Germans some breathing room on the supply accumulation issue so have been slowly manoeuvring over time to be able to conduct some attack at what look to be the best locations to cause casualties; even if not take ground. The major offensive, supported with significant artillery, falls against the overlap between British and Belgians at Ypres. I realise that attrition suits me better against the French and that at Ypres the Belgians can take up some of the losses. However, attacking the French anywhere in strength right now would be telegraphed and allow him to reinforce and cause me awful losses. I was able – I think – to maintain an element of surprise over the point of attack. Sadly, it still required an attack across a river. The other attack does fall on a relatively weak point of the French line SE of Luneville which was about the only place I could achieve some small element of surprise; but in doing so it forces a weak attack. It should cause some French casualties, use up some more of my supply to satisfy the General Staff and perhaps force some French reserves to this area of the front.*
- *Caucasus: For some peculiar reason, the Russian relinquished some ground here last turn, allowing me to rebalance more effectively. I am suspicious of the intent behind his moves, though.*
- *Mesopotamia: I am expecting an imminent attack on the approaches to Baghdad give that he has built up his strength there. The best I can do is just try and ensure at least two defending SP in each location.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet. He is reinforcing the Dolomites so I suspect some sort of attack here in the near future.*

AP: I cannot regard a turn in which the Germans suffer 21 DM and the French suffer 2 DM as anything other than an Allied victory.