

## Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

### GT131: 17 – 20 February 1916 (February 5)

#### General Situation

The war placed great strain on the transport infrastructure of the belligerents. The British and French merchant marine fleets were at risk on the high seas. On land, the railways could be tested to their limits especially in the less developed parts of Europe and the Near East.

In February 1916, the Russian railways were struggling to keep up with the demands placed on them. For some weeks they had been operating at full capacity. The focus of the fighting had been shifting from the north after the end of the Battle of Riga and movement subsequently had been towards the centre and south of the Russian front line. Each of these major sectors had only one main double-tracked line serving it and their routes were not always advantageous to the situation.

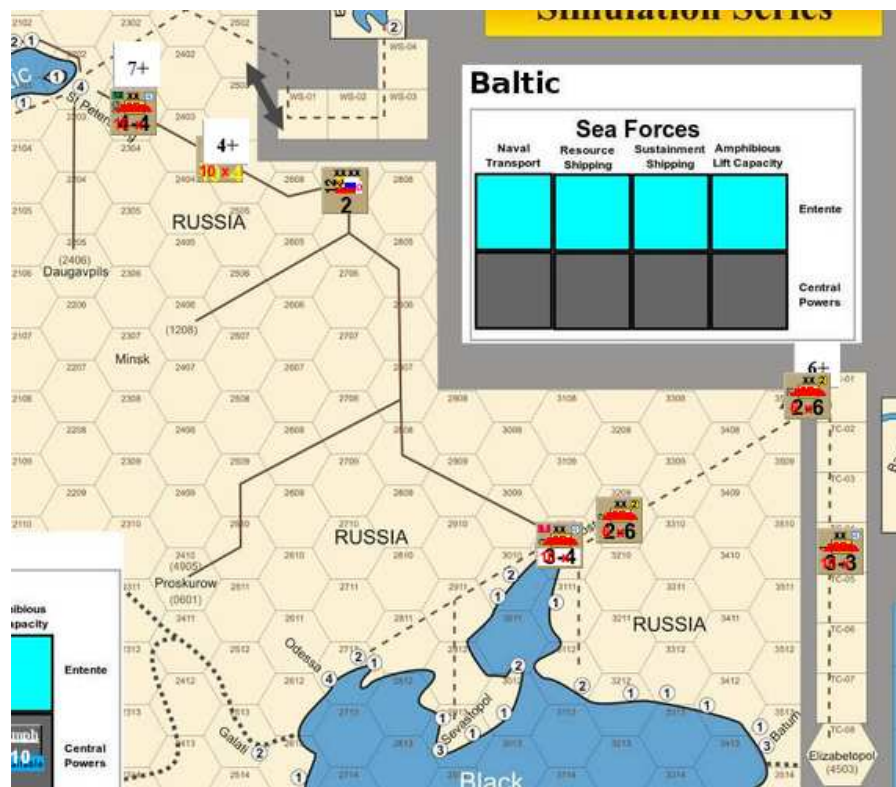


Figure 1: Russian Rail movements, 17 - 20 February 1916.

At the same time as these north-south movements, the front was being reinforced from new reserves and reinforcements which were concentrated at Moscow. The railway between Archangel and St Petersburg had been working to transfer supplies purchased in the West. A reinforcement of the Caucasus Front was also under way but the rail line to Baku and Elizabethopol was very slow and trains had to be widely spaced to ensure that the single-tracked sections did not become blocked. On 20 February, the Russian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division arrived at Rostov-on-Don and its commander was told that the onward journey would be delayed at least four days because a Cavalry Division was ahead and was also being delayed by shortages of trains in the northern Caucasus.

## The Eastern Front

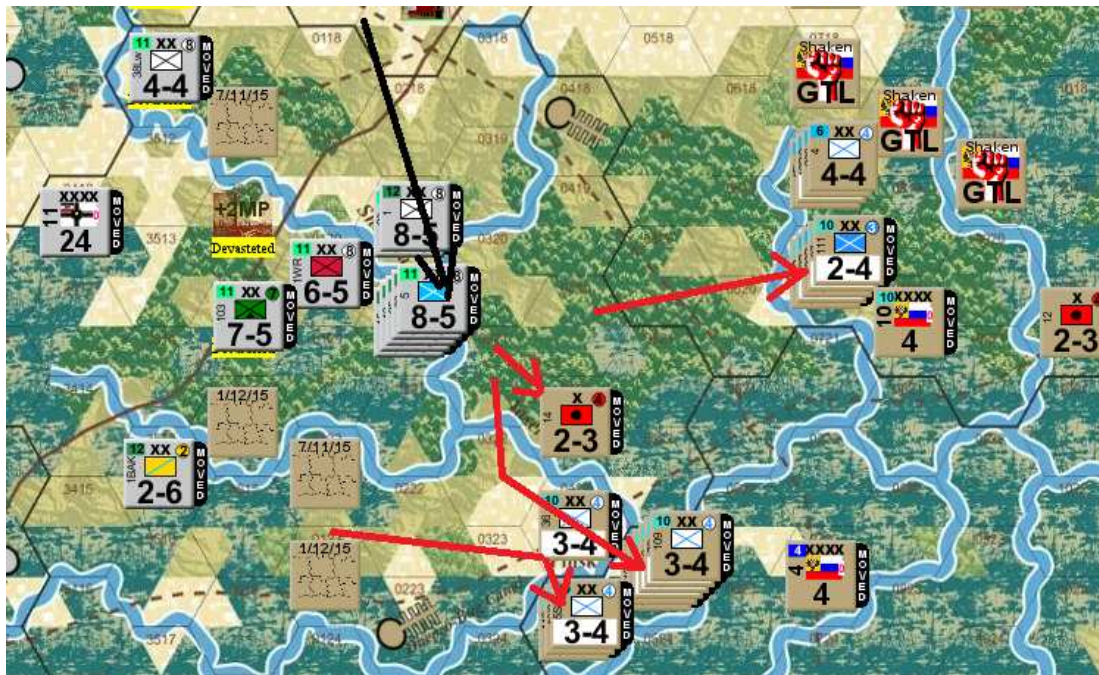


Figure 2: The Slush March, 17 - 20 February 1916.

Mackensen kept his 11<sup>th</sup> Army moving rapidly across the Russian front moving south from Baranovichi (4-5E.0217). A thaw led the German infantry to name this episode the Slush March which became slower as they penetrated the northern margins of the Pripet Marshes. The German route took them along the Shchara River from which the Russians were withdrawing. Here the Russian retreat was not as well organised as elsewhere. The Russian 10<sup>th</sup> Army split, some going due east, some others retreating through Pinsk supposedly with the purpose of covering the retreat of the Russian 4<sup>th</sup> Army which was also pulling back in the central part of the marshes.

The road conditions were unfavourable to moving heavy equipment. The Russian 14<sup>th</sup> Artillery (Heavy) Brigade floundered along the levees of the Yasel'da River. It took four days to move their weapons 20 kilometres. It did not take much for a blockage to delay their retreat by several hours. The best thing would have been to throw the heavy guns into deep water to prevent their capture by the Germans but the commander of this unit was stubborn and he persisted in believing that he could get everything to Pinsk in safety as on 20 February he heard the Russian 36<sup>th</sup> Division was still in that city.

It was a bad period for the Russian Artillery. Austrian siege mortars had opened up on the Russian positions covering Teofipol (5-5.4507) on 18 February and they had expertly targeted several gun emplacements of the Russian 4<sup>th</sup> (Heavy) Artillery Brigade supporting the Russian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. These Russian guns ought to have been withdrawn out of range once they knew they had been spotted (their counter-battery efforts were ineffectual), but instead they remained in place engaged in a futile gun duel as the enemy gunners slowly worked their destruction.



## The Balkans

The Allied probe through Viničani (7-6.1409) in the Vardar Valley did not go much further. Although the enemy had hardly been sighted, on 19 February, the French 34<sup>th</sup> Division was ordered to dig in while the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and the Serbian Skopje Division were recalled and moved behind the Bregalnica sector of the front. The Serbians protested fiercely at this having believed the advance to Viničani was the first step in a push towards their home city.

## The Near East



Figure 3: Townsend persists in the fighting around Baghdad, 17 - 20 February 1916.

Following the success of the British/Indian attack at Nahrawan (7-9.3020), Townsend was anxious to exploit it with further pressure on the northern flank of the Turkish positions covering Baghdad. There was some delay and confusion caused by doubts about the whereabouts of the 6<sup>th</sup> Indian Cavalry Brigade. Some reports of the fighting at Nahrawan had said the cavalry had charged into the centre of the Turkish defences and been destroyed there which had been expressly contrary to Townsend's orders. This turned out not to be true as the cavalry brigade had reconnoitred in the desert and according to its report had been to Ad-Didbuiiya and back. This satisfied Townsend at the time, but it was pointed out after Townsend's dismissal there was no such place as Ad-Didbuiiya – at least it has never been shown on any published map. Today, in the Indian Army, "going to Ad-Didbuiiya", is code for going somewhere unreal for a few days (owing to drugs or drink), or it refers to a short unauthorised leave of absence including for soldiers missing in combat who later return. An Anglo-Indian fusion rock band of the late 1970s called "Deadpool" also claimed this tradition as a reference for the origin of their name.

Once it was clear that the 6<sup>th</sup> Indian Cavalry Brigade was still covering the desert flank, Townsend confirmed that, on 19 February, the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division was to make a full strength attack with the objective of reaching 'Arab Yahudah (7-9.2921) which was located at a crossing place of the Diyala

River north east of Baghdad. The Indian advance was blocked by the Turkish 29th Division which was still preparing defences in this sector when the Indian attack began. In the next few hours, the Turks showed that they were capable and flexible defenders. They gave up ground retreating to successive improvised firing positions which exacted such a costly toll on the Indian infantry that by mid-afternoon on 19 February all thought of their advancing to the objective was given up.

### **The Western Front**

Heavy fogs and cloud grounded all aircraft between 17 and 18 February across most of the Western Front. There was no resumption of the recent German attacks in Flanders and Lorraine and Haig and Joffre both admitted uncertainty as to what the Germans' next move might be. The French and British units which had suffered during the last fights were relieved and fresh units took over their sections of the front. The Belgian Army had no such reserves and it was forced to reduce its front to three Divisions with (for the moment) no large units out of the line. The section of the front previously held by the Belgian 5<sup>th</sup> Division was now taken over by Canadian units that had come to support the British 1<sup>st</sup> Army in Flanders.

### **The Italian Front**

Cadorna allowed the press in Italy to speculate that he was about to attempt to re-take Cortina (6-4.2715). This was pure misinformation. Several units sent to the eastern Dolomites to support this ruse were simple diversions. Others coming over from the western Dolomites were turned away from the road to Cortina and directed north to Arabba and Canazer (6-4.2516). Cadorna put four Infantry Divisions and an Alpine Brigade on these paths on 19 February intending to reinforce the bridgehead already gained on the far side of the peaks in the localities of Groden and Badia (6-4.2515). This he expected to be a jumping off point for a surprise thrust towards the Innsbruck – Bozen railway which was tantalisingly in reach of an advance from there.

Unfortunately for Cadorna, he faced an alert opponent. Not the semi-moribund Archduke who presided over the Army of Tyrol in the Trentino who did not anticipate the threat at all. Instead it was Borojevic of the Austro-Hungarian 6<sup>th</sup> Army who ordered a strengthening of his right flank on 17 February, two days before the Italians reached Arabba. Borojevic's reserve of three Alpine Brigades which he placed at the key junction of Toblach (6-4.2613) would certainly be able to reach the town of Bruneck (6-4.2514) before the Italians. The road between Toblach and Bruneck was not normally considered a vital strategic artery but it was nevertheless the only direct route between the two halves of the Austrian front and without it everything would depend on the railway via Innsbruck.

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: I have to up the ante now on the EF to bring down AH supply stocks. For openers, I unleash a barrage from a mixture of AH siege artillery and German guns on detached duties to the AH to reduce some forward Russian artillery. I will have to follow this up in near proximity with a ground assault; but will leave him to try and work out where. Robert queried my allocation of supply to the EF. It is simple; I wish to maintain a credible threat on the EF and know I have sufficient for both offensive and defensive activity on the WF. There may yet be options to use it on the EF and it keeps the Russian on his toes – just*

look at the eastwards moving wave of Russians as my roving German armies cruise the line like a giant shark scaring off the swimmers. The fleeing Russians are more akin to tsunami than wave.

- *Balkans: The AH 5<sup>th</sup> Army is still not quite postured to conduct any offensive; but is now in a good position to be used offensively.*
- *West: My attacks in the west did not work out as well as I had hoped and I came off the worse for it. It has resulted in several French divisions scuttling eastwards though.*
- *Caucasus: Another pause.*
- *Mesopotamia: He punched my defences rearward last turn with a vigorous attack. It still does not allow him to credibly threaten Baghdad, however, and I now have sufficient fighting power to push my western defences out to the Euphrates and strengthen my line along its length. I can hold and more reinforcements are still straggling through the desert.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

### DM Summary – February 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
<b>Germany</b>	-	-	-	21	-			12	33	1100	Good
<b>Austria-Hungary</b>	2	-	-	-	-			1	3	454	Good
<b>Ottoman</b>	3	-	-	1	1			-	5	67	Good
<b>Bulgaria</b>	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	15	Good
<b>Central Powers</b>	5	-	-	22	1			13	41	1635	
<b>France</b>	-	-	-	2	-			-	2	673	Good
<b>Great Britain</b>	-	-	-	9	2			-	9	248	Good
<b>Russia</b>	2	-	-	-	2			-	2	716	Shaken
<b>Italy</b>	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	53	Good
<b>Belgium</b>	-	-	-	(4)	-			-	(4)	(100)	NA
<b>Serbia</b>	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	(32)	NA
<b>Entente</b>	2	-	-	11	4			-	13	1682	

AP: *The pace of events is quickening again. I had a few plans in train.*

*It looks like my opponent has spotted what I was up to in the Dolomites and has started to react to it. He cannot however prevent in time my initial attack and will have to be careful that he positions reserves so that my follow up attacks will also fail. The Bozen-Innsbruck railway is vulnerable and if I cut it the whole Austrian Army in the Trentino is in jeopardy.*

*I had to postpone an attack in the Balkans because I mispositioned the British Division which was supposed to attack. Although it is still winter, I am willing to take a few hits to hurt the Bulgarians who will have a lot to do when Romania and Greece activate.*

*I am also happy to take attrition with my force in Iraq. The winter is the best season for the Allies there and I am only disappointed that it has taken me so long to find a spot where I can attack and expect to inflict some losses on the Turks.*

*What is less clever is the mis-management of my Russian artillery. I should know by now that Russian artillery does not retreat very rapidly and in marshes they are very vulnerable. The CP now has a chance to destroy a Russian brigade and may be able to surround it if they are patient. I have also left through forgetfulness another artillery brigade in place for destruction by Austrian and German artillery bombardments further south. This game really punishes the mispositioning of units.*