

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT132: 21 – 24 February 1916 (February 6)

General Situation

In London, the newspapers had decided that General Townsend was the hero who was about to capture Baghdad. Although he had not yet succeeded in breaking into the city, the military correspondents, none of whom was very close to the scene of the action had decided that there must be something very clever in his stabbing at the Turks one moment from the west and next moment from the east (though in fact these moves were much more separated in time). Unlike the Generals on the Western Front and the Dardanelles, Townsend, they declared was very light on his feet.

This lauding of Townsend was part of the springing of new hope on the Allied side which emerged once the end of the winter could be felt approaching. Everything could be anticipated and nothing had yet gone wrong in 1916. Haig had a confident air after the German attack in Flanders had been repulsed and there was, in late February, news of a British action in the Balkans. The gallant Italian allies were also in the fight again according to an announcement of the Italian staff who declared they had made an ambitious assault in the Dolomites despite the continuation of the winter there.

The Central Powers' had their heroes too. None was more prominent at this time than General Mackensen commanding the German 11th Army. Mackensen had long been a popular figure both within and outside the German Army. Ever since he had humiliated Ludendorff in a marathon game of Skat in 1912 he had been affectionately known at "Der Hai" (the Shark).

The Eastern Front



Figure 1: Mackensen, "the Shark", moves upriver to Pinsk.

On 22 February, the *Berliner Tagesblatt* carried a cartoon illustration of the fighting in the Pripet Marshes. It depicted Mackensen as a helmeted shark advancing up the Yasel'da River toward Pinsk while behind him a tsunami-like wave of Prussian soldiery overwhelmed hapless Russian gunners abandoning their weapons in panicky flight.

Such a style of drawing would have been more at home in the more iconoclastic British and French magazines. Subsequently it became known the artist responsible for this representation of Mackensen was Max von Bismarck, an illegitimate son of the Iron Chancellor, who had picked up a taste for schoolboy humour when sent to an English public school, where he was subject to terrible bullying. Von Bismarck was then attached to the staff of OberOst as an intelligence officer. It was subsequently alleged that he was the controller of the spy Mata Hari though a dispassionate analysis of the relevant papers has questioned who was controlling who?

Von Bismarck's cartoon illustrated an actual episode. On 21 February, at Lahisyn (4-5E.0419) the rapidly advancing German 11th Army had caught up with the Russian 14th Artillery Brigade. Many guns were captured intact and the 11th Army claimed the whole unit had surrendered *en masse*. Given their booty, it was not perhaps unreasonable for the Germans to believe that they had received a formal capitulation but in reality most of the gunners had given up on extracting their weapons and had fled from Lahisyn across the bridges and causeways which led to Pinsk which was still in Russian hands. The Germans were hot on their heels and next day those bridges and causeways were the scene of a fierce fight as the German infantry attempted to occupy Pinsk. They were not very fortunate in this because the city was defended by one of the best Russian Divisions (36th) and this had covered every dry approach with machine guns. If Mackensen really had been a giant shark he could have bitten off Pinsk easily. Instead the wave of Prussian infantry broke against the city's defences and the waters of the Pripet Marshes swallowed up many who fell trying to get onto dry land there.

Russian defences also held firm in Volhynia where Archduke Josef Ferdinand made another attempt to break these positions on 21 – 22 February. The Archduke's Austro-Hungarian 4th Army struck the Russian line at Szumsk (5-5.4405) which was in the sector of the Russian 5th Army. This part of the front had been the scene of much fighting in the previous year and the steppe south of Szumsk was still littered with the debris of war and had been thoroughly looted by both sides during the winter. If Archduke Josef Ferdinand had an abiding fault as a commander it was a weakness for excessively long approach marches. The mobility that Mackensen could command with the German 11th Army was not so easy to achieve with the Hapsburg forces. The Austrian artillery was asked to do impossible things (which they dutifully attempted and in fact surpassed all reasonable expectation). Even so, the attack on Szumsk was delayed and not all the committed forces were able to reach their jump off points in time. The artillery could manage only the briefest of barrages. Nevertheless, even a witness as sceptical as the philosopher Wittgenstein was awed by the bravery and discipline of the Austrian attack:

"On the morning of 22 February my battery watched as the Kaiser Schutz Brigade formed up ready for the attack. All my studies in logic and language failed me. Words and reasons had no place unless it was the bare instruction to advance that would soon be given and could not be questioned discussed or analysed. The obedient machine had been crafted over centuries. No single person had made it. Nothing could now stop its purposes.

These reflections were over in an instant. As the 88th Brigade moved forward to its doom, we had to tend our guns so their human vulnerability could be accompanied with a dawn chorus of metal shrieking in the air.”

The Russian 5th Army reported that day that it suffered a serious attack that had put two of its Divisions in difficulty, one of which (107th) was said to have lost over two-thirds of its effective strength. The Austrian attack had therefore had some success but Wittgenstein’s account goes on to explain that the aftermath was horrendous in the Hapsburg camp and that most of the formations which had been committed suffered grievous losses. The following day was exceptionally quiet as if no-one dared move. The Russian line was still intact.



Figure 2: The Third Battle of Szumsk, 21 - 22 February 1916.

The Balkans

The British and French had been very keen to demonstrate to the Serbians that they had come to the Balkan front to fight and they had effectively asked their Allies to name a time and a place for a suitable operation. After some confusion and delay, the Serbian II Corps proposed an attack across the Bregalnica River at Stip (7-6.1709) before the spring rains made a crossing too difficult. The British agreed that their 3rd Division would support the attack which occurred on 23 February. The assault was actually made by units from the Serbian Macedonian and Skopje Divisions¹ who found

¹ Do not look for these units in your counter-set. I have taken advantage of the Vassal capability to rename units.

that the Bulgarian defence in this sector was rather thin. It was relatively easy to make some inroads into the defence but the attack was not really pressed and the British hardly saw any action. The gains were also temporary for the area of the Serbian bridgeheads around Stip turned out to be subject to flooding and it had to be abandoned only three days later due to a rise in the river level.

The French were not impressing the Serbians much either. On 24 February, the French 34th Division withdrew from Viničani (7-6.1409) which it had held for barely a week. Its commander had obtained Sarrail's permission to withdraw because it had been impossible to effectively supply the unit and in the advanced position it retreated from it had been menaced by a large concentration of enemy units which were spotted in the more sheltered valleys of the Golesnica Mountains to the northwest.



Figure 3: The Serbo-British attack at Stip, 23 February 1916.

The Near East

Townsend required one more effort to try and break the Turkish Army around Baghdad. This took the form of a second attack aimed at 'Arab Yahuda (7-9.2921). The British commander really had not taken into account the growing strength of the Turkish Army at Baghdad which was still being reinforced as further units arrived from Mosul. 'Arab Yahuda was defended by a fresh Turkish 29th Division and Townsend's attack depended on Indian units which were all depleted in strength. Further it took two days to even organise the attack and by 23 February when Townsend was ready the defenders were equally prepared. The result, inevitably, was disproportionate losses to the Indian infantry and a distinct decline in the confidence of the Allied force.

There were still no significant moves by either side in the Sinai Peninsula or in the Caucasus.

The Western Front

British and French planners were feverishly studying the balance of forces on the Western Front. German planners were trying to piece together the same information. A century later it is relatively easy to make the counts which were for them just estimates and most good history books now carry this information. It is of course a mistake to assume that every Infantry Division was an equal force but except those involved in the recent local attacks in Flanders and Lorraine most units of both sides had enjoyed several weeks of rest during the winter.

A commonly quoted assessment of the Allied and German orders of battle on 24 February gives the following total deployments on the Western Front:

German Infantry Divisions	101.5
German Garrison Brigades	7
Belgian Infantry Divisions	3
British Infantry Divisions (including Canadian)	29 (3.5)
French Infantry Divisions	98
German Cavalry Divisions	2
British Cavalry Divisions (including Indian)	3 (1)
French Cavalry Divisions	8
German Artillery Regiments	13.33 ²
German/Austrian Siege Companies	8
British Artillery Regiments	15
French Artillery Regiments	18
French Siege Artillery Battalions	1

The growing superiority of the Allies in heavy artillery was the most noted development that was evidenced by these figures though the German siege artillery of the highest calibres was still unmatched by the Allies.

The Italian Front

The Italian Army could have been proud of its winter movement into Groden. After a secret march lasting a week, by 23 February the Italian 4th Army had got five Divisions onto the northern flanks of the Dolomites and positioned them around Wolkenstein in Groden (6-4.2515) ready to strike west toward St Ulrich (6-4.2414). Intelligence suggested that St Ulrich was defended by a Polish Landwehr Brigade (93rd) and there was a Croatian mountain brigade on the higher ground commanding the valley.

² For the Artillery I counted SPs with 3 SP equalling a regiment.

Unfortunately, Borojevic, the commander of the Austro-Hungarian 6th Army had suspected something was in the offing and in shifting reserves onto the right flank of his Army he had provided the rear of the unsuspecting Army of Tyrol with some badly needed support.

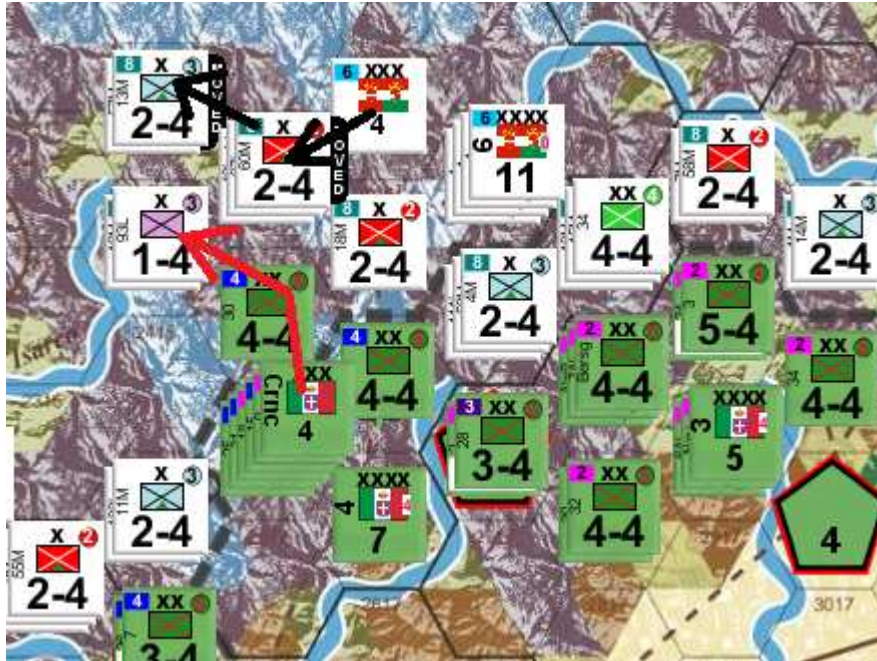


Figure 4: The St Ulrich campaign, 21 - 24 February 1916.

The Italian attacks took place at the end of a stretched line of communication and it was hard for news of the fighting to filter back to the Italian headquarters which remained back on Italian soil at Cencenighe (6-4.2516). By the second day (24 February) it became clear that there was going to be no breakthrough and when it was confirmed late in the day that the Austrians still held St Ulrich it was necessary to pause and think again.

Player Notes

- *CP: East: Russian miscalculations and determination to avoid battle have resulted in an artillery regiment being left behind which my roving 12th Army is able to capture in a column attack and still also march on to assault Pinsk. It is a weak attack against Pinsk due to extended supply lines over winter, but his counterattack will likewise be weak and it enables me to burn 14 supply points for Germany. It sounds crazy, but this is crucial to avoid badly unfavourable attacks being forced on me on the WF. AH also has to make good on offensive action and does so against a slightly more weakly held trench south of the Goryn River. I am doing so from the open which will penalise me on the C-Attk, but it seems my least worst option.*
- *Balkans: More manoeuvring without anything to show for it. I hope to be in a position to attack the French 34XX before the end of the month. I would rather take losses attacking the French than against the Serbs.*
- *West: Nothing of any consequence occurs this turn. I am licking my wounds.*

- *Caucasus: Intelligence has the Russian 1Ca HQ moving towards a Black Sea port and other Russian forces occupying similar. I fear there is imminent possibility of a Black Sea invasion.*
- *Mesopotamia: More punishment for me outside Baghdad but, by conducting a tactical withdrawal, I managed to minimise my own losses and still cost the enemy a brigade out of his ORBAT. I was then able to re-occupy the vacated position although it has caused a setback to the preparation of my longer term defences there.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: He has massed forces in the Dolomites and I expect an attack within the next few days. I can do nothing to reinforce the threatened location. Such does the Dolomite front continue to seesaw back and forth.*

DM Summary – February 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	-	-	21	-	3		12	36	1103	Good
Austria-Hungary	2	-	-	-	-	8		1	11	462	Good
Ottoman	3	-	-	1	1	1		-	6	68	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	1		-	1	16	Good
Central Powers	5	-	-	22	1	13		13	54	1635	
France	-	-	-	2	-	-		-	2	673	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	9	2	2		-	13	250	Good
Russia	2	-	-	-	2	8		-	12	724	Shaken
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	1		-	1	54	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	(4)	-	-		-	(4)	(100)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-	-	-	(1)		-	(1)	(33)	NA
Entente	2	-	-	9	4	11		-	26	1693	

AP: *This turn I made three attacks which is a lot for me compared to recent form. It might be noticed that they are all on peripheral fronts in which the CP has no opportunity to use supply. They therefore release none of the Rule 22 pressure that the CP is under. I thought twice about attacking with the British in Iraq because I am in danger of over-weakening my force there but extra losses will free up logistical capacity and should allow me to move another Division up river. I don't mind the attrition. I have a British Division in lower Mesopotamia which is doing nothing at the moment and I am sending ships to Basra in case it is better to move it to Egypt.*

The CP attacks in the East did not go very well. There was a 1/6 die split in my favour at Pinsk which somewhat offset the cost of losing an Artillery Brigade to a column attack. The Austrian losses are particularly welcome to me. However, the Germans were given an opportunity to expend supply at Pinsk and that is something I am trying to avoid.