

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT133: 25 – 29 February 1916 (February 7)

General Situation

At Scapa Flow, the *Grand Fleet* lay majestically at anchor as the ultimate guarantor of the *blockade* of the Central Powers. The German Navy was increasingly conscious of its inability to challenge its opponent. Ever since the *Lusitania* episode, diplomatic considerations had prevented any proposal which would have seen the *U-Boats unleashed*. Junior officers of the *High Seas Fleet* vented their frustration by disputing that any *USA Reinforcements* - not *1 Corps* - would reach Europe if hostilities with the United States ever broke out. Their contempt for American arms was almost total and in their wardrooms they joked that if the Americans ever built an Army the *USA 1st Army* would have to be commanded by General Custer and the *USA 2nd Army* by Billy the Kid.

In Switzerland, Lenin was also frustrated at his lengthening exile which had been made aggravating by correspondence from an ambitious Russian constitutional reformer, *Kerensky*. *Offensive* were the younger man's political propositions to the Marxist theorist. While the liberal politician was prepared to contemplate the future *fall of the Tsar*, he absolutely rejected all possibility of a *Bolshevik Revolution* in Russia. Lenin was also angered because *severe weather* warnings had closed some of his favourite ski resorts and he feared this was his last opportunity to enjoy high quality Alpine skiing before political responsibilities would consume all his free time.



Figure 1: Brest-Litovsk, scene of the "Treaty" between Falkenhayn and discontented Eastern commanders, 26 February 1916.

A figure who took socialist goals more seriously was *Walter Rathenau*. He feared the breakdown of the *Reichstag Truce* which had calmed the German polity ever since the *guns of August* had sounded

in 1914. Austria called for *German reinforcements* (2 Corps in Galicia were not enough). Hungary called for *German reinforcements*, 2 Corps for the defence of Transylvania. These demands on Germany threatened its industrial *peace*. *Offensive* operations placed such a strain on the economy that the Minister for Industry knew it was futile to throw *everyone into battle* and instead a proper balance between production and military needs had to be attained.

Towards the end of February 1916, there was a serious military command crisis as *Falkenhayn* was forced to recognise that he might prove as dispensable as *Moltke*. He was all too aware of the plotting of *Hoffmann* and others at *OberOst*. They had been scheming in a *cloak and dagger* fashion with others at the headquarters of Mackensen's 11th Army and also leaders in the *Sud Army* such as *von Below*, who was responsible for training the *Alpenkorps*.

This conspiracy was blown by a female spy who stole some *wireless intercepts* from a hotel room she shared with the deputy foreign minister, *Zimmermann*. *Telegrams* she procured from this source transparently speculated how the war would develop if "*H-L takes command*". This amounted to advocacy of a military coup and the infighting which this caused and the scandal of the security breaches ultimately sent *Mata Hari* to her *place of execution*.

The Chief of the General Staff travelled East at great speed to put a stop to this sedition though he was only temporarily successful. Falkenhayn re-imposed his authority at a meeting in eastern Poland hosted by the staff of the *German 12th Army* on 26 February. Falkenhayn made sure he had allies such as *von Hutier* and *von Francois* who were bribed with offers of promotion to command the *German 17th and 18th Armies*. Von Francois, who fancied himself as *Blucher* reborn, was duped because the 18th Army had not yet been formed and the position offered was a desk job in Berlin. The unfortunate general, who was not well-liked, was so far from realising he had been tricked that he lost dignity in fulsomely assuring Falkenhayn that he was well suited to a command in the West because he could speak *French*.

Mutiny in the top echelons of the German Army was actually averted by concessions made by Falkenhayn as he ceded plenipotentiary powers to his eastern rivals including the right to negotiate with neutrals such as *Romania*. Subsequently Ludendorff wrote that he and his colleagues referred to Falkenhayn's partial surrender as the *Treaty of Brest-Litovsk* since that is where the deal was struck.

The Western Front

British troops in France were entertaining themselves with improvised sports. One game known as "*yanks and tanks*" was a version of tug-of-war in which teams tried to yank each other into a water obstacle, a flooded trench for instance. The losers were "*tanked*" literally among them typically official visitors to the army in France who had gone *over there* hoping to see serious training but ended up being roped into what was inevitably the weaker team and were soon covered in slime. Anyone who had business with units close to the coast was always invited to join an early morning *race to the sea* which was undertaken stark naked in the better regiments.

At Haig's headquarters, the planning for the next British offensive was making progress and accelerated after the distraction caused by a visit of *Lloyd George* to the front line. He came with the bad news that the *Landships* being developed in England were proving unreliable and the ambition

of creating a *Royal Tank Corps* would have to be deferred. Lloyd George toured the sector of the *British 1st Army* and was especially keen to meet the Dominion forces but he only saw the staff of the Canadian, *CND Corps*. *AUS Corps* was still technically part of the *MEF* in the Near East and the British minister seemed to have forgotten this. He also narrowly avoided being drafted into an impromptu yanks and tanks tournament organised by the Canadians – who were good at it.

Haig tried to persuade Lloyd George that the Reserve Army currently in France should be upgraded into an active *British 5th Army* but he was told that such reinforcement was out of the question. The burden of the planned offensive was expected to fall on the *British 4th Army* but General *Allenby* commanding the *British 3rd Army* was clearly ambitious that his command should have a big share in the show. It is somewhat notorious now to know that Haig authorised experiments and training for operations relying on *Chlorine Gas* and, thanks to French assistance, the more potent *Phosgene Gas*. This temptation to use illegal chemical weapons had been prompted, it has always been said, by credible fears that the Germans were looking to develop a *Mustard Gas* capability.

Perhaps more usefully, Haig ordered a detailed re-examination of the reasons for the poor performance of the *British 2nd Army* at Armentières in November so the lessons could be re-learned in preparation for new operations. Assuming gas would not be available, the outcome of the British attack would depend, as previously, on the artillery above all. It was recognised that the skills and ammunition required for a *hurricane barrage* might also be lacking. In such circumstances, the explosive potential of a massive *mine attack* recommended itself to Haig's staff. The Germans could *entrench* their front ever more deeply in the coming weeks but it was supposed they would not discover the danger from below.

As the last bout of *severe weather* dissipated in late February, the air war began to intensify. The situation was very balanced in early 1916. One week, the Germans seemed to have *air superiority*. The next week, the Allies claimed the same *air superiority*. The threat of attack from the air was increasing and gave the ground troops even more reason to *entrench* at every opportunity. On 27 February, German aircraft had machine gunned enemy positions along the Oise River which was at the boundary of the *French 7th Army* (to the east) and the *French 10th Army* (to the north). In retaliation the *German 14th Army* suffered the attention of the French pilots two days later when they attacked a munitions *convoy* near Peronne.

These were not the only developments in the air campaign. For some time, the Germans had employed in Northern France what became an *independant* [sic] *air force* with strategic objectives. This was responsible for the growing menace of *Zeppelin raids* in England and elsewhere. It turned out to have little impact on the ground war in France.

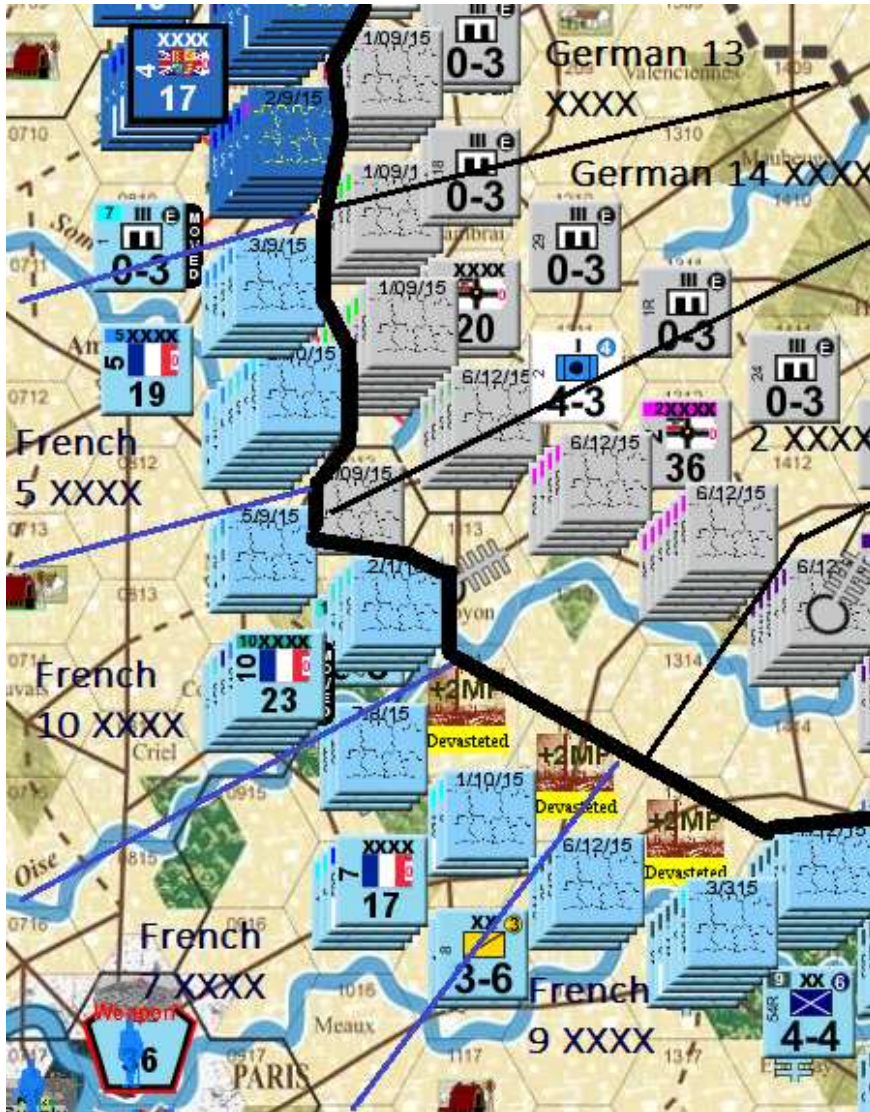


Figure 2: The Western Front, central section. Note the defences in depth adopted between the Aise and the Marne, 25 - 29 February 1916.

The Italian Front

In the Dolomites, the success of the Polish *Landwehr* in defending St Ulrich (6-4.2414) had frustrated Cadorna's surprise winter campaign aimed at the railway between Bozen and Innsbruck. In a private report, with limited circulation, the Italian commander admitted that the attack had been stopped by *fortified machine guns* that had been tactically located in 14 *points* of resistance all mutually supporting.

Cadorna, nevertheless, ordered the Italian 4th Army to change direction and find some other way to break through. On 27 February, they found a weakness by pushing to the northeast rather than the northwest. Here the Austrians had only their 18th Gebirge Brigade and this was pushed back into the mountains when the Italians organised a fighting column which moved swiftly to La Villa Stern and St Kassian. The enemy was deployed to block the valley leading north and were surprised when the Italians headed straight up onto the plateau behind the peak of La Varella (6-4.2614) which stood at over 3000 metres. This plan should have been ruled out for to advance at such high altitude in February was remarkable. The Italians only had one Alpine Brigade in this operation but the 4th Army

had an unbeatable advantage in numbers (more than 10 to 1). Not everyone was fit enough to move across the mountain flanks but those that did found the Austrian firing had become sporadic and nothing could stop them reaching the Passo di Limo (6-4.2614) on 29 February. From there they knew they controlled one of the routes which supplied the Austrian forces occupying Cortina (6-4.2715).

Cadorna's memoirs recalled this success as a moment which had made him "most proud". Nevertheless he was not satisfied for long. Complaining to the King of *Italy* that same day, Cadorna protested that the Minister of Defence had told him, referring to Parliament, that "*they shall not pass* the requisitions which he [Cadorna] sought to allow him to reinforce his front with the *Italian 5th Army*". This parsimony he misleadingly compared to the enemy for he predicted the arrival of the *Austria-Hungary 10th Army* and perhaps also the *Austria-Hungary 11th Army* to be transferred as reinforcements to the Italian front within the next few weeks. In fact, if either of these formations existed in February 1916, they were no more than potential re-designations of other units or training establishments that were simply the repositories of replacements for other commands.



Figure 3: The Italians reach the Passo di Limo, Cadorna's "most proud" moment, 27 - 29 February 1916.

The Eastern Front

The Tsar's weakening reputation was not helped by a prominent newspaper in St Petersburg which carried a headline on 27 February which declared "*Tsar Takes Command of Great Retreat*". This referred to the continuing retirement of the West Front in Belorussia which extended from the sectors of the *Russian 6th and 7th Armies* covering Minsk to those of the *Russian 9th and 10th*

Armies falling back in the Pripet Marshes and mixed up with the remnants of the Russian 4th Army which had fled from Pinsk in the face of the *German 11th Army* on 26 February.

The Tsar badly needed better military advice and had been looking for a suitable candidate ever since Riga had been finally lost to the *German 10th Army* in January. The Tsar's first idea had been to call General *Pleve* out of retirement but it was discovered he was on his deathbed in Moscow and his only living concern was to discover the whereabouts of his son who was thought to be a prisoner of the *German 9th Army* which had captured him near Grodno the previous summer.

Once this alternative was excluded, the Tsar selected the best general Russia had, *Brusilov*. *Offensive* plans previously stitched together by the STAVKA were all rejected by the new appointee. He gave the Tsar a ready-made plan which had been given the code name *Operation Arab*. *Northern Army* operations above the Pripet Marshes were futile and Brusilov argued that no amount of *Russian Reinforcements* (two *Corps* were in training) would allow them to defeat the Germans. Instead they had to look again at attacking in the south. Brusilov urged the Tsar to consider the possibilities on the Dniester front where the *Russian 11th Army* confronted the *Austria-Hungary 7th Army*. Even a short advance would see the re-conquest of Czernowitz. To support the achievement of this objective, Brusilov further advocated that the *Russian 12th Army* which was currently entrained to go to Minsk should instead be sent to the Southern Front. He didn't win that argument.

Brusilov was also able to point to the good performance of the Russian Armies south of the Pripet Marshes. The Austro-Hungarian 4th Army's last attack at Szumsk (5-5.4405) had been repelled with heavy losses. Archduke Josef Ferdinand was still persistent and tried to make progress on 26 – 27 February with another move on a narrow front between Szumsk and Teofipol (5-5.4607). This effort also petered out with very little to show for it. Brusilov argued that the sound Russian defences here might make a good jumping off point for their own offensives later in the year.

The Balkans

The German Army was not the only one which suffered troubles at the top in early 1916. The entire staff of the Serbian Army had been dismissed after it lost the confidence of the government-in-exile and the Field Marshal *Putnik* was not spared from this cull. By recent Serbian standards this had been relatively humane in being announced by way of a pay cut rather than summary executions. Unable to stay in *Greece* the fallen hero had to take ship to France for medical treatment. He was still much beloved in the Serbian Army and an honour guard of officers of the highest ranks lined the road to *Salonika* to wish him well and confer their grateful thanks for his past deeds. All present, swore an oath that they would exact vengeance for the Voivode against *Bulgaria* whose treachery they blamed for every trouble they had.

The Near East

In Egypt, General Murray was preparing for action. On 28 February he inspected the Engineer Regiment attached to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force at El Qantara (8-8.0939). Here he discussed the plans to soon commence construction of the famous *Sinai Pipeline* which would be the key to crossing the peninsular and engaging finally with the Turks defending Palestine. Murray was conscious that this campaign would start at a time when the *Libyan Revolt* was still unsuppressed and the *war in Africa* continued despite all efforts to trap the elusive Lettow-Vorbeck.

Murray rightly concluded that he could not himself wait for a more ideal time. He had also done well in identifying the talents of the officer who had mapped much of the region which they were about to cross, Captain *Lawrence*. *Of Arabia* and the more distant parts of the Near East, Murray had less knowledge than he should have. He underestimated the Turks despite the exploits of *Kemal* and *Liman van Sanders* who had put a stop on the Allied campaign at the Dardanelles. Not even the fact that General Townsend was at that moment beginning a *withdrawal* from the vicinity of Baghdad would have persuaded him that the Ottoman Empire was not moribund. His confidence flowed from the fact that the Caliph had not been able to summon up the great *army of Islam* which he had threatened at the outset of the conflict.



Figure 4: Townsend begins to withdraw from the vicinity of Baghdad, speeded away by a Turkish counterattack, 26 – 29 February 1916.

In the Caucasus, the dark nights were illuminated by the spectacular electric storms ("*Yilderim*") for which the region is famous. The Turkish IX Corps had concentrated for an attack across the Mescit Daglari (6-8.1916) a high alpine ridge about 50 kilometres north of Erzerum but the operation was cancelled as it became clear that none of the passes were open.

On the other side of this front, General *Yudenitch* had finally received orders to prepare to attack again. There were a signs of increasing energy on the Russian side of the front as the first significant redeployments since November began. The Tsar had been moved by reports of the Armenian atrocities which were said to have been as bad as the *rape of Belgium* – or even worse. Archbishop *Michael* of Tblisi was even more moved and cast an anathema on the Sultan's *army*. *Of the oriental depravity* which he (in the idiom of the day) condemned, the Archbishop demanded only that all perpetrators be burned with *flamethrowers*. The war was getting increasingly embittered.

DM Summary – February 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total [%SM]	Morale
Germany	-	-	-	21	-	3	-	12	36	1103 [68.93]	Good
Austria-Hungary	2	-	-	-	-	8	5	1	16	467 [84.90]	Good
Ottoman	3	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	7	68 [19.71]	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	16	Good
Central Powers	5	-	-	22	1	13	6	13	60	1655	
France	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	2	673 [74.78]	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	9	2	2	1	-	14	251 [19.68]	Good
Russia	2	-	-	-	2	8	1	-	13	725 [120.8]	Shaken
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	-	5	58 [19.33]	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	(4)	-	-	-	-	(4)	(100)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-	-	-	(1)	-	-	(1)	(33)	NA
Entente	2	-	-	9	4	11	6	-	32	1707	

Player Notes

- CP: *East: After the successful overrun of an enemy artillery regiment but subsequent poor attack on Pinsk, the 11th and 12th armies start to withdraw westwards of the marshes to reconfigure. AH military planning proved poor in their attacks in the south as most were done with only limited supply and I was punished as a result. I persist this turn, however, with yet another attack by AH. This is something I feel compelled to do to ease pressure over the next month; even though these attacks from out of trenches in the winter are punishing. Next time I will carefully plan offensive action to expend supply before the winter kicks in. Lesson learned!*
- *Balkans: I still lack suitable positioning to attack effectively and the Serbian attack on my Bulgarians last turn stung.*
- *West: Nothing much but positioning my Engineers – including AH Engineers on attachment – to be prepared to possibly start building the Hindenburg Line.*
- *Caucasus: The Turks flex their muscles with a limited attack in the mountains whilst also manoeuvring to protect Black Sea ports after reports of concentrations of Russian amphibious craft and units along the Black Sea.*
- *Mesopotamia: Fighting continues outside Baghdad. My last counterattack there caused him more damage than I suffered and the balance – extremely fine in this theatre – has swung back in my favour; sufficiently for me to engage in a small attack of my own. The*

two Turkish attacks this turn likewise alleviate some of the pressure on the Turks to conduct offensive activity.

- Palestine: Quiet; although I continue to build up my forces along the border of Sinai.
- Italy: I reinforce in the Dolomites to discourage any further attacks there for now.

AP: Overall the game is warming up as the winter approaches its end. There is a loosening of the peripheral fronts. Growing quantities of supplies accumulated on the main fronts have to be expended sooner or later.

There have been two column attacks in the last two turns although there have probably been only 3 – 4 in the game since the beginning.

The latest German one was a straightforward overrun of Russian artillery that had got in the way of a large German stack. The Italian one this turn was used to help capture a hex that could not have been captured by a single attack. This highlights the significance of column attacks as force multipliers by bringing about the ability to strike the same hex more than once in a turn. In a game where the resilience of a defence often depends on the speed by which reinforcements can reach a threatened hex this ability of the attacker to increase the tempo is important but not used much.

In this case the relevant Italian attacks had a 44% chance of capturing the hex (no single attack could have succeeded). The situation of each was.

Type of Attack	Attack force	Defence force	Attack combat strength	Defence combat strength	Attacker loss	Defender loss
Column	20 Inf SP 5 supply	2 SP 1 supply	20/2/2 = 5	2x3x2 = 12 + 4 drm	3	1
Normal	17 Inf SP 1 supply	1 SP 1 supply	(4 + 6.5)/2 = 5.25 = 5	1x2 = 2 + 4 drm	1	1

The ordinary objections to a column attack are it uses too much supply and defenders' counterattacks are doubled. However, this is not necessarily a decisive bar to action. In the above example the supplied column attack was no weaker than the unsupplied normal attack. Additional attacker losses are just that. If you are prepared to bear them, the column attack becomes a useful tool.

What is not yet explored is the use of column attacks to batter stronger positions. It might seem terribly reckless but there will be situations where this is the only way to achieve an objective. If the defender is short of supply then the subsequent attacks will encounter weakened opponents as it will not be easy to keep a significant stack supplied to deal with multiple combats.