

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT136: 10 – 14 March 1916 (March 3)

General Situation

The Tsar's promise of elections was starting to be a bit irksome. Back at his headquarters at Mogilev, the Tsar was happy to be lost in the minutiae of supervising his Armies. Serious thinking about the political future was not so easy given his separation from the rest of the government and the distraction of his environment. No date was announced for the elections and excuses were being offered for the delay. If this persisted much longer then the fragile political peace could unravel.

In the West there was no such political weakness. In fact the German attack on the Belgian Army on 11 March united the French and British populations into fresh support for the war. What, the newspapers asked, did the Belgians do to deserve being the target of fresh aggression? Did the Germans want to exterminate them completely? Was it offensive to the tidy German mind, they wondered, that a scrap of Belgian territory remained outside their control? In London and Paris, Belgians dined out for free in mid-March 1916.

West Front



Figure 1: The attack on Nieuwport, 11 -12 March 1916.

The German attack was certainly a surprise. They struck positions of the Belgian 2nd Division at dawn on 11 March crossing the watery terrain and clearly hoping to get through to Nieuwport on the coast. The German attack was supported by a lot of heavy guns but it would have had more success had not the infantry advanced very cautiously. The critical moment occurred about noon when the Belgians considered withdrawing their most exposed units. However, at a Royal Council held not far from the front line the government and King decided they would have to hold on. Any

retreat would mean losing the last Belgian territory kept out of enemy hands. The British 1st Army had arranged to send a Canadian Division to assist the Belgians and this was expected to reach the battle zone by the afternoon of 12 March. By then, the fighting had died down. The Belgians had lost over a third of their effective infantry but not much ground had been lost.

The big question was why had the Germans attacked on the Flanders coast? The British feared that this was an initial test of an offensive aimed at the Channel Ports. Haig had endorsed the Belgian decision to stand as he feared any German advance would prevent Dunkirk from continuing as the most useful port for supporting British operations on the Continent. Joffre simply observed that the attack must have been a diversion and the Germans would certainly turn their ire back to France sooner or later.

At Spa, Falkenhayn had regarded the matter as a limited tactical battle to help the German 16th Army gain better and drier positions that might be useful in launching further offensives. Falkenhayn was suffering still from the backbiting of the Eastern Front generals and important circles in Berlin which were agitating for more offensive action whereas the Chief of the German General Staff was determined to maintain his own freedom of action and not be forced into a premature effort when the direction of Allied plans was so unclear. Although the Flanders operation was not a major affair in Falkenhayn's estimation, he allowed it to be talked up as a way of deflating the animus of his critics.

Italian Front

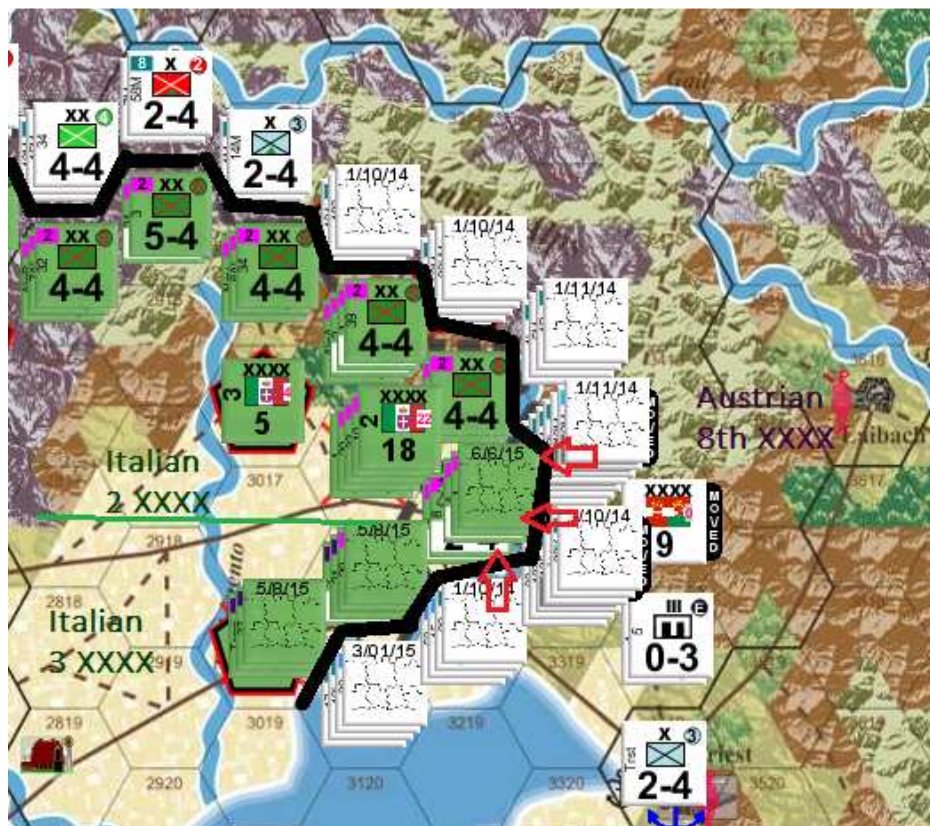


Figure 2: 3rd Battle of the Isonzo, 10 - 12 March 1916.

There was another surprise attack on the Italian Front. In mid-March, Cadorna was in a buoyant mood after the success at Cortina (6-4.2715) and his attention now turned back to the Austrian fortress at Lavarone (6-4.2218). He now considered he had enough heavy guns to crack this position although this meant depriving every other sector, including the Isonzo Front, of their best weapons.

Consequentially, when the Austro-Hungarian 8th Army threw itself against the Italian line between Plave and Gradisca (6-4.3217) on 10 March, the defending infantry had less artillery support than they would have had a few days previously. This attack was the first time that the Austrians had attempted to push the Italians back along the Isonzo and they succeeded in clearing a few minor bridgeheads and gaining a few of their own. Nevertheless the conditions for this 3rd Battle of the Isonzo were difficult. Temperatures were low with cold Alpine winds coming down from the north and freezing fogs gave the fighting a spectral quality. The struggle was at its peak for three days. Casualties were also relatively high and stubborn Italian resistance caused heavy losses in at least six of the brigades committed by the Austrians. When the Austrians were forced to take breath the front had barely shifted at all except at the most small scales.

The Eastern Front

The fighting on the Szumsk – Teofipol line erupted again at Bilohir'ya (5-5.4506) with further Austro-Hungarian attacks after a pause of a week on 11 March. Once again German howitzers provided the Hapsburg infantry with an augmentation to their firepower. There was a nervous aspect to the fighting here. The common infantry had been fighting in this corner of the front for several weeks and they were fearful that they would be sent into action again and again without respite. The Russian defence wavered too and on 12 March three Russian Divisions, including the 3rd Guards, pulled back to avoid further losses. This retreat was planned but executed in such a way that it afforded a chance for the Austrians to penetrate the front. This opportunity was not taken as the attackers were ordered to take minimal risks and there was no possibility of improvising a rapid advance. Within 24 hours the Russians were back and repairing their lines. The German artillery needed more time to reposition if they were to continue with the same methodical advance.

By mid-March, the Russian West Front had returned to many of the positions abandoned in the retreat of the last few weeks. The German advance had been a raid culminating with the attack on Pinsk in February. The Germans had not this time intended to hold their ground.

The Balkans

The inhabitants of Tirane woke on 14 March to discover columns of Italian infantry moving through their streets. The fluctuating control of the two sides in Central Albania was as rapid as ever. This was not really a strategic compliment but simply due to the fact that neither side had much to gain there and would readily relinquish what they had for the smallest reason.

The Near East

General Murray was invited on 13 March to inspect some interesting archaeological remains along the road between El Qantara and Romani (8-8.1038) which appeared to be the footprint of a XVII Dynasty tomb with some remaining frescos. His interest was prejudiced when he was told that the

construction of the Sinai railway was being delayed because of this obstacle. As he spluttered his disbelief and insisted on “military priorities” he was told that it was a question of Egyptian law and that although the Khedive had been displaced the law hadn't. Murray said he would find a way round that in five minutes but actually the law was respected and the rail line was directed to go around the site once he had calmed down.

In Mesopotamia the river flood had arrived with great force. The difficulty of moving supplies including medicines meant that the Indian troops retreating on Kut suffered losses due to outbreaks of disease. The campaign in front of Baghdad had exhausted many and when they reached Kut in mid-March most lay down to sleep and could not be roused for days.

The Caucasus front was now busy with activity. On 10 March, the Turkish IX Corps commander was summoned to the tent of his commander Mahmut Kamil Pasha and told that his force should leave the Coruh Valley and attack south. The terrain in that direction was mountainous but the Russian 10th Division which held the high ground was spread over 40 kilometres of inhospitable terrain. This cordon was too weak to stop a concentrated punch. The Turkish 3rd Army commander also revealed that orders had been left for two additional Divisions to attack on 11 March from the direction of Erzerum and the Russians would be forced to defend against threats on both sides of the mountains.

Not every military plan can work like clockwork but this one did. The IX Corps got three Divisions onto the high plateau despite a gruelling march and from there they were able to push aside the Russian riflemen and linked up with the Erzerum force on 12 March at Tortum (6-8.2116). Like most operations in this war it had been costly for the attackers as the Russians picked off many Turks as they threaded through the difficult terrain. Nevertheless, the Turks had won something of a victory and it looked even less likely that the Russians would be able to get through to Erzerum this year.



Figure 3: Northern Armenia, 10 - 14 March 1916.

Russian plans were actually at that moment focussed on the Pontic coast. The Russian I Caucasian Corps had been reinforced with cavalry and mounted infantry and these forces were now heading towards the Turkish held port of Rize. The Russians had a covering force watching the port since almost the start of the conflict and it was known to be weakly held. However, the Russians realised that they would only capture it if there was a genuine surprise there and this seemed unlikely as the Turks were known (thanks to Armenian spies) to be fortifying their coast.

DM Summary – March 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	-	6					12	18	1121	Good
Austria-Hungary	4	-	9					1	14	481	Good
Ottoman	-	-	2					-	2	70	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-					-	-	16	Good
Central Powers	4	-	17					13	34	1688	
France	-	-	-					-	-	673	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-					-	-	251	Good
Russia	4	-	4					-	8	733	Shaken
Italy	-	-	4					-	4	62	Good
Belgium	-	-	(5)					-	(5)	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-					-	-	(33)	NA Tirane recaptured
Entente	4	-	8					-	12	1711	

Player Notes

- CP: East: The AH 4th Army attack again with no expectation of anything much other than meeting political demands for offensive action. I am attacking the weakest point possible to AH in the Russian line even though it can only be attacked from a single hex. Along the rest of the front there is no great change.
- Balkans: I considered using the Bulgarians to attack the British force in the Balkans this turn but the cost in supply and odds made me reconsider. I think this is a front I will have to wait for him to come to me on. Unfortunately, he can use Serbs as cannon fodder with no real risk whilst he builds up British, French and Italian offensive capability on this front. Also, I cannot readily make good on any Bulgarian losses.
- West: I use rail capacity to shift forces northwards for an attack on the Belgians. This may seem like folly, but worst case is a static battle of attrition but where he will be forced to use up Belgian supply and limited Belgian manpower. Whilst this will have no impact on the overall TE war effort, it may force the British to stretch themselves to shore up the Belgians. Best case is I force him to retreat from his coastal position allowing me to advance adjacent to Dunkirk and threaten the port facilities there. It is a long shot, but I feel I must pressure him somewhere and this seemed the best option strategically. No

other attack generates any strategic risk. It might force him to counterattack with his British forces before he is comfortable doing so.

- *Caucasus: I follow up the Russian withdrawal along the Coruh River with an attack on his line roughly midway between the Coruh and Aras rivers. If this forces him back then I may start to be able to split his line and rive him back towards the border. I have also been reinforcing the coastal regions in anticipation of an amphibious raid.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: He has weakened some of his defences along the Isonzo; most notably his toehold on AH territory. I am able to concentrate elements of the 8th Army – including some recently arrived artillery – against him here for an assault. I have no plan to retake this territory which would place me in open ground with my back to the river and options to attack me from three sides. However, it should keep him honest here and gives AH some breathing space from the mandatory attacks.*

AP: This turn really confirmed for me that the CP will do anything to avoid leading a major offensive against France this year. The attack on the Belgians , which would normally be the last CP choice, proved that.

This is not so much stalemate as standoff. I am starting to think the CP strategy might work. It comes at a cost of these less than optimum attacks but am I really going to wait another 3 – 4 months before starting any Allied offensive in the West. I might not have that option.

It is likely there will be a standoff in the Balkans. Until the Romanians or Greeks come in I doubt I will be able to make much headway. It seems the CP has also reached the same conclusion.

The moves I am now doing in the Caucasus are something I have planned for some months. Drawing the Turks into the Coruh Valley was indeed part of it. However, I have realised there may be a flaw in what I intend due to some friendly trenches in the wrong place. The more I play this game, the less I want trenches everywhere. The other problem I have on this front is that Russian morale is now so bad I do not have the staying power needed to break through to Erzerum.