

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT137: 15 – 18 March 1916 (March 4)

General Situation

It had been confirmed by nearly 20 months experience that modern warfare was indeed deadly. When the armies clashed the losses were tremendous. Since it was intolerable to expose men constantly to the stress and danger of combat they had to spend most of their time in comparative safety. The front lines often became depopulated as they only needed to be garrisoned with sufficient men to hold until reserves could be brought up. As many as possible were kept out of range of the guns and everybody kept out of sight when close to the enemy. The idea of an empty battlefield had been recognised before the war and this prophecy was fulfilled completely.

The Western Front

Ernst Junger sat outside his dugout enjoying some of the warming sun. On 15 March, he complained to his journal that he had seen so little action in the last few months that he might have to apply for a transfer to the Eastern Front. The 8th Ersatz Division was concentrated south of Laon and his unit was situated on the steep bluffs overlooking the Aisne River. Everything there was exceptionally well prepared for defence. Junger spent some of his time in the forward positions which were a day's march further south and were really nothing more than observation posts. Even there it was rare to see the French. The enemy had pickets around Soissons but their main forces were well hidden. There was nothing to do but wait.

The Italian Front



Figure 1: Italian Artillery positioned around Lavarone, 17 - 18 March 1916.

The Austro-Hungarian offensive on the Isonzo did not re-commence and Cadorna did not reinforce that sector either. He was intent on a new operation against the fortress at Lavarone (6-4.2218) which had repelled an Italian attack in the previous autumn. Cadorna intended that the attack would begin with a major artillery bombardment and four artillery regiments were dragged into position to

strike at the concrete emplacements that controlled access to Lavarone and the road to Trent itself. Cadorna had allowed a lot of time for the artillery to do its work and had calculated that they might need to fire for over a week before the infantry went in. However, very quickly negative reports were being made. The continuing bad weather meant that observation of shot was nearly impossible as low cloud blanketed the whole area. Some batteries also reported that they had been unable to locate themselves in their prescribed positions because the slopes were still too icy to carry their heavy equipment up. For these and other reasons, on 18 March, Cadorna ordered a postponement for four days hoping the weather would clear.

The Eastern Front



Figure 2: The Nieman River sector of the Eastern Front, 14 - 18 March 1916.

The Eastern Front was quietening down again. The fighting in Volhynia had stopped again and the Austrians were withdrawn to their trench lines covering the Galician border. The penetration along the Stryk valley had ended and the pressure eased on the Russians in the Pripyet Marshes. Further north the Russians were digging in on their old lines in Belorussia though their front there was weaker than before the winter.

The Balkans

There was no major initiative here. On 17 March, Sarrail ordered the French Marine brigade to undertake a reconnaissance of Bulgarian positions east of the Struma River in the vicinity of Melnik (7-6.2208). The country in question was difficult to approach and most of the reconnaissance was done with binoculars from Greek territory. Unsurprisingly, few Bulgarians were seen and it was wondered if the enemy were really there.

The Near East

The British had pushed 28th and 5th Indian Divisions forward from Romani (8-8.1138) to Qesm bir Abd (8-8.1338 – 39) in anticipation of operations crossing the Sinai Peninsula. The best intelligence in mid-March estimated that the Turkish 4th Army had eight Divisions on the far side of the Peninsula, guarding the border of Palestine.

The situation in Mesopotamia had turned unfavourable to the British. Townsend's force festered at Kut. It amounted to the remains of the three Indian Divisions which had been at Baghdad during the winter but which were barely more than one third of their regulation strength and would have to be reorganised. Reinforcements had arrived in the form of the 10th ("Irish") Division which now formed the backbone of Townsend's force. However, the floods prevented any idea of taking fresh offensive action as did the belief that the Turks had six Divisions at Baghdad with further reinforcements on their way.



Figure 3: Black Sea coast to Erzerum, 14 - 18 March 1916.

The Turkish 3rd Army began pulling back from its most advanced positions in the Coruh Valley and also abandoned the recently captured village of Tortum (6-8.2116). The Turkish military command explained this to Istanbul by blaming lack of supplies.

Meanwhile the Russian moves on the Pontic coast were building in strength. The main difficulty was that the front was 100 kilometres west of the Russian border and the road to Rize from Batumi was hardly an easy one. The Russians had sent cavalry and mounted infantry to support the I Caucasian Corps in the expectation that they would move faster but the terrain slowed them down too. In

order to gain surprise, the Turkish forces in Rize were left in peace but behind the Russian lines there was a steady build-up. Out to sea Russian warships were gathering. The German cruisers in Istanbul were refitting and the eastern Black Sea was for the moment free for Russian naval operations.

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: I had started advancing the AH 1st Army but I think it will be foolish for AH to push into Russia at this stage; particularly given the nature of the defensive terrain for the Russians. So, they head back to their original trenches as does the 4th Army, now exhausted after its consecutive attacks. AH is at 481 DM and must be frugal with its manpower whilst still balancing the political demand for offensive action. The Germans are now also considering a strategic withdrawal back towards the border. There is nothing to be gained by sitting so far forward in Russia when he can skulk back to the GTL every time I look like striking anywhere. I need to focus on the WF as a priority.*
- *Balkans: More small manoeuvrings. There is no opportunity in the Balkans and the Italians are allowed to occupy Tirane without a fight. I get no food for holding Albania and see little further point in it.*
- *West: My offensive against the Belgians achieved little but has forced the British to bolster the Belgians with an infantry division and another in depth to prevent the risk of the Cinque port being threatened. Was it worth the cost in manpower? I'm not sure...*
- *Caucasus: Bold plans – my previous illusion that I could turn his flank. The Turks have the strength to do so, but not the supply necessary to carry attacks in the mountains. I settle back into my previous positions to avoid stretching the forces there too thin.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*

- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: I hope I caused something of a fright along the Isonzo, but suspect not much. If it reduces the threat in some other areas of the line then good enough for now. The Italians have no fear whatsoever of their losses at this stage.*

AP: I cannot claim to be advancing my cause very rapidly at the moment. I decided to postpone the attack on the Austrian fortress at Lavarone (6-4.2218) after reflecting on the impact of SR 34-5 which imposes longer and more extensive penalties on winter fighting on the Italian front. I am not sure what I will do. The winter penalties last until the end of April.

My initiative in the Caucasus is still underway and it is not yet clear whether it will succeed. I rolled successfully for a Russian naval sortie at the start of this month and I am ready to use it next turn.

In addition, I am feeling a bit more sympathetic to the German defensive stance in the West than I was a couple of turns ago. DWK has lots of opportunities for different pacing and it would be a mistake to underestimate the different possibilities. This was also expressed at exactly the same time as I was having the same thought in another post of Sam Fellowes #11779 on 19 January 2016 under the heading "German pacing":

"I've been thinking about situations under which Germany might decide not to launch a 1916 Verdun on France. These are more general thoughts, rather than comments specifically on the current situation of the centenary game.

Though Germany will cause immense damage via a Verdun, it will also receive large damage. Not doing this does have some advantages for the victory conditions. As I understand it, if Germany or Austria-Hungary does not surrender before 1919 then the worse possible result for the Central Powers is a draw.¹ Additionally, if Germany has not reached economic collapse, and Austria-Hungary has not surrendered, then Central Powers obtain a marginal victory. So whilst I think a Verdun is typically required to get a French surrender, the Germans can still in principle win by minimizing aggression. Now, how realistic surviving to 1919 is I do not know, trying this would mean suffering more demoralisation from food shortages, have many more months of the Entente receiving more reinforcements, plus you need Austria-Hungary to survive and the Ottoman to not, I estimate, surrender before 1918 (giving you six months productions which means nine months until RLP dries up and six until supply dries up, giving three difficult and three very difficult months to hang on).

But I'm wondering if Verdun can be avoided and still reach a French surrender. Germany in 1916 will have to spend a lot of supply to avoid exceeding limits, this can be done on Russia, limited attacks on France and defending against the Entente. So imagine Germany reaches 1917 with relatively low demoralisation and high supply, and faces a Russia likely at economic collapse (if focused on enough in 1916) and a France also with relatively low demoralisation. France and Britain will likely have less supply saved up (firstly, they cannot save as much, secondly, they produce less, thirdly, they may have decided to be aggressive). So what advantages does Germany have from this position. Firstly, the 1917-1918 combat table. This causes more damage per supply spent, which is useful. More importantly, now has a realistic chance of breaking a French trench line (6 full strength French

¹ Not actually correct. If the Germans or Austrians surrender during 1919 then the Entente would still win (substantially) so long as neither Britain nor France are at Economic Collapse – RL.

divisions attacked by 18 full strength German divisions plus three full strength artillery brigades (27s) causes 36 casualties, forcing a retreat). Given the 77 supply required to do this, you do not get to roll that dice often (plus you need clear terrain which can be attacked from three hexes), but it could happen [Thinking about it, from memory (my Grand Campaign is buried away currently), I don't think Germany has three 27s, so having to use 24s only gets to 35, but that would be enough to cause a retreat against all but six full strength divisions, plus might set up retreat for next turn]. Secondly, you could also try and limit things in 1917 and wait until you can start building assault divisions. A March 1918 assault by a relatively intact German army with loads of assault divisions and 700 supply would surely have a good chance making a major break through. I would not rule out capturing Paris and many other French cities (ideally Rouen and Le Havre which should limit the number of American divisions which can be deployed). Get the French to economic collapse and limit the number of Americans who can be deployed and Germany will soon find themselves facing very weakened forces on the western front. Keep focusing on the French, including capturing cities as the French start to run out of forces, and French surrender becomes possible.

I'm just wondering about possible German strategies, partially for the purposes of my own game. One great thing about Der Weltkrieg is that with so many different factors, it is very difficult to judge exactly how powerful Germany would be in 1917 or 1918 if they tried to as defensive as possible on the western front in 1915 and 1916. Similarly, would this also leave France too powerful to defeat? And probably the larger problem with this plan is the Ottomans. Whilst a defensive Germany in the west can protect Austria-Hungary quite well, they are somewhat more limited in protecting the Ottomans, especially if they want to use German resources to build up the German army rather than supply the Ottomans with weapon points. That said, Ottoman defeat is terrible if Germany is aiming to survive until 1919, whereas aiming for French surrender in mid-1918 would require a relatively early Ottoman defeat for that to become critical."