

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT138: 19 – 22 March 1916 (March 5)

General Situation

In a country house outside Stockholm one of the most secret meetings of the 20th Century took place on 20 – 21 March 1916. Not even the Swedish government was aware of it. The German record was destroyed and the Russian record did not emerge into daylight until the opening of the Soviet archives and then only after some further delay. The Bolsheviks had certainly never been interested in advertising the Imperial state's credentials as a searcher for peace.

Nevertheless, it is historically incontrovertible that high ranking diplomats of both Germany and Russia met in Sweden at this time. Both had made sure that none of their allies were aware. Neither the Tsar nor the Kaiser knew about it either, nor did all but a few select individuals in the top military-political echelons. Each party of this negotiation had been the nation that had suffered most in the war so far on their side. Possibly they had most to gain by getting out of the war and even forging a post-war alliance. Germany wouldn't abandon Austria, but Turkey was expendable. The Russians would have to separate from Britain and France but Germany might make it worthwhile. This would be nothing less than the revival of the Three Emperor's Pact and Poland could be put back in its cage.

The most specific discussions at this meeting concerned the Baltic region. The Russian delegation was most concerned to get reassurances here. The Germans saw the Baltic in the same light as Poland in that it should fall within a wider customs union which, subject to Imperial sovereignty, might allow for some greater local political freedoms perhaps no more than would be consistent with political reform in Russia itself. No commitments could be made as to where the lines of control would run. The Germans hinted that they might relinquish Latvia (which they only partially held) but nothing could really be decided until the respective governments might determine to treat this initiative seriously.

The Western Front

After the German attack on the Belgians, no further major actions on the Western Front had followed. Everywhere formations on both sides had been withdrawn from the front for training. Training was indeed a priority. General Haig himself had recently told a newspaper reporter that the three most important things for a soldier were "Training, training, and training." The same reporter had tried to get some answer to the question, when the Allies might attack? The only permitted answer was, "Later this year!"

The Italian Front

The Austrians were aware of the Italian concentration threatening Lavarone (6-4.2218) and some reinforcement was sent to the fortress. The Italian guns on the encircling heights nevertheless remained silent apart from an occasional ranging shot. Visibility remained bad and nobody expected the Italian artillery to fire blind into the clouds.

The Eastern Front

It is doubtful that any of the Army commanders on the Eastern Front were aware of the Stockholm talks. However, the diplomatic initiative was reflected in the military situation. The German and Russian Armies were still disengaged along most of the front and the German front was, with the exception of a few strongpoints such as Brest-Litovsk, largely a cordon with stronger reserves posted to the rear. In Latvia, the Germans were experimenting with local militias. The idea was that these would defend themselves against any Russian advance and the intervention of the Germans on their side would be interpreted as a defence of Baltic independence. On 20 March, the German 10th Army actually gave the Latvians joint responsibility for the defence of Riga. This was not very consistent with the discussions near Stockholm and the capabilities and loyalty of the Latvians was undoubtedly over-rated.

On the Russian side, the question now was whether an offensive was possible? The disposition of the Germans suggested that ground could be taken if there was a forward movement by the Russian forces north of the Pripet Marshes. However, the condition of the Russian Army was still very poor. STAVKA had a decided opinion that if the Germans moved to parry any Russian advance it would likely have been disastrous for the Russians.

Only in the southern sectors opposite the Austrians did the Russians believe they still had a moral superiority. The Tsar and General Brusilov were supporters of a future offensive along this axis and they took every opportunity to reinforce the South West Front with any quality troops the Russians still had.



Figure 1: The Baltic Front, 19 - 22 March 1916.

The Balkans

On 21 March, the Balkan front erupted into unexpected activity. The leading instigator was the commander of the French Corps Expéditionnaire d'Orient, General Sarrail. He had negotiated an

agreement with the new Serbian Army commander, General Mišić, and they had agreed that there should be an early thrust toward Skopje. This was not to be done by half-measures. The French committed all three of their infantry Divisions while the whole of the Serbian 2nd and 3rd Corps would advance with the Montenegrins also on the extreme left.

The Sarrail-Mišić plan involved an advance on a broad front including a crossing of the Cvrna River in the east. The French supported by the Serbian 2nd Corps reached Viničani (7-6.1409) on 22 March retaking the town which they had held for a short while recently. The Austrian 5th Army was responsible for the defence of this area but it became quickly apparent that the enemy had withdrawn to stronger positions further north and Viničani was given up without any significant fighting. For the same reasons, the Serbian 3rd Corps pressed forward as far as Krajnici (7-6.1310) without difficulty and the Montenegrins also took Omorani (7-6.1210) a small hilltop village close to the road which ran round the southern margin of the Golesnica Mountains. In two days the Franco-Serbian force had advanced over 20 kilometres without encountering serious resistance.

This was not the only Franco-Serbian operation at this time. On 21 March, the French Marines supported by the Obrenovac and Belgrade Brigades crossed into the eastern side of the Struma Valley at the eastern extreme end of the Allied line. Once again the enemy, in this case the Bulgarian 5th Division, had withdrawn. The Allied forces were able therefore to reach their objectives which were the towns of Sandanski (7-6.2108) and Melnik (7-6.2208). These were places Serbia hoped to gain from Bulgaria at a peace conference and the low cost of this operation was cause for satisfaction among the Serbians who now were more prepared to acknowledge the usefulness of their French ally.



Figure 2: The Sarrail-Mišić Offensive, 21 - 22 March 1916.

The Near East

There was no significant movement in the fronts on the southern boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. The British armies in Egypt and Mesopotamia were more concerned with developing their logistical infrastructure than with seeking immediate battle.

The Russians, in contrast, were anxious to seize the Turkish port of Rize. They were ready to begin their assault on 22 March and ships of the Russian Black Sea fleet moved close inshore to begin bombarding Turkish positions to support the attack. The Turks had a good regiment (8th) in and around Rize but it was heavily outnumbered by the Russians who used two strong cavalry Divisions and two infantry brigades to swamp the defenders who quickly became aware their situation was hopeless. By the evening, the Turkish flag was no longer flying over the port and the Russians were in full control.



Figure 3: The Russians capture Rize, 22 March 1916.

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Chasing after Russians is proving futile and demands an unnecessarily long front line. Being this far forward extends my rail LoC, stretches me thinly and gives the Russians the advantages of easy LoCs, a GTL to fall back on and the benefit of terrible terrain for me to conduct any attacks in. So, I have decided to start a withdrawal back to a line along the German border and along to the AH eastern border. It should allow me to free up even more German combat power.*

- *Balkans: Likewise in the Balkans, I have decided to start a phased withdrawal to benefit from better LoCs and to draw the British, Italians and French away from the comfort of Greece and the proximity of beachheads and SPODs. It means allowing them onto Bulgarian soil, but this is a price worth paying.*
- *West: Quiet – just a small bit of lateral movement to prepare to counter any French offensive action.*
- *Caucasus: There is definitely an amphibious assault in the offing and little I can do to prevent it or even effectively counter it.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: The Italians are concentrating artillery and infantry mass in the Trentino. An attack is likely imminent and there is little I can do other than prepare to receive it.*

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	-	1			-	3	71	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	16	Good
Central Powers	4	-	17	-	1			13	35	1689	
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	

AP: This was another light move. I am pleased to have taken Rize at no cost with the help of naval bombardment. The Turks were more concerned to defend places further west. I want to see how far I can stretch the Turks along the Black Sea coast and I shall have to roll for further amphibious operations in the next month or two.

I almost made an attack in the Balkans rather than just occupy the ground surrendered. The problem was I only have Corps HQ there and this restricted how much supply I could expend. I rejected the possibility of inflicting only one loss on the Austrians while risking maybe seven hits in return. I have been happy to take disproportionate losses in the right circumstances but that was too much.

This was despite every Austrian DM point being very valuable at the moment. With four more they will be vulnerable to Russian Artillery Surprise. However, I do not have to hurry this and I elected to

further postpone action on the Italian front until the weather is better. Austria is not much more than 200 DM away from surrender so the CP must keep its losses very low now – with 65 turns left this year a loss rate of 3.36 per turn would be fatal – and the Russian surprise attack is nasty.