

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT139: 23 – 27 March 1916 (March 6)

General Situation

The German plan on the Eastern Front was becoming clear. Latvians, Lithuanians and Poles had been armed in the hope that these would take up the German cause against Russia. Falkenhayn was concerned about the threat of a major Allied offensive in the West and German lives would be economised if the German Army in the East assumed a reserve role which would only intervene if the Russians attempted to recover the ground they had lost.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff had not been convinced, but this was a matter for the authority of the General Staff and the plan was put into effect. The weakness most apparent was that there had been little opportunity to train or organise the Baltic populations and there had not been that many volunteers.

However, it was soon evident that the German intentions were more cynical. They were pulling back from more exposed positions and in fact wanted to highlight the weakness of the Baltic nations to ensure that they represented no competition to German influence in the Russian borderlands after the peace treaty. The Germans were already assuming that the Russians would not be able to stage an effective comeback.

The Eastern Front



Figure 1: The Baltic Front, showing the path of Steiner's squad, 23 - 27 March 1916.

“Steiner stood on the small hill (4-5N.1606). In one direction was the river. In other directions was immensity. To the east, the trees stretched to the horizon like the sea. The shades changed in the way Steiner was all too familiar with. A little lighter colours and the country was more broken up perhaps with some clear farmland. Bluer tones denoted marshes. If they were to re-join the regiment, Steiner would have to head towards the light.

Sometimes, when he was minded to talk, Steiner would tell the men how he read the countryside but it was rare for someone to actually comprehend. They all thought he had some magical gift of finding the way. There was no magic. Steiner had been trained in reconnaissance and patrolling and a lifetime in the mountains had taught him to divide the horizon into six sections. In the Alps it had been a matter of life and death whether you could distinguish the alpine hex side from the merely mountainous. Here in Russia distance was the fatal element.

They had been left behind. The 17th Reserve Division would be at Szwali (4-5N.1009) by now. That was more than a hundred kilometres away. Stransky would have written them off. The rear guard of the rear guard were not meant to come back. Steiner imagined how indifferent Stransky would be. Stransky cared about military order and was superficially professional. He could affect concern for the men but he did not, in any real way, mind what happened to any one of them. They might as well be cardboard soldiers. He wouldn't now be wasting a thought on Steiner and his squad unless he was congratulating himself for removing an unwanted germ from the regiment.

The Latvian militia was next to useless that was obvious. They would probably go over to the enemy camp at the first showing of the Russians. Fortunately only half of them had rifles. It still made escape more perilous. They would have to avoid villages and keep out of sight during daytime.

The big question was the Aa River bridges. If they were down, they would be dangerously held up. Hals, the comic from Berlin, had suggested they telephone ahead. It would be at the beginning of the telephone directory and easy to find. They didn't have a telephone or a directory. The nearest one was probably in Riga.

The Latvian captain had visited that morning for a social call and to make sure they were still there. He had said that the Russians were already marching on Riga. If the Russians made a serious effort to push through at Riga (and what was there really to stop them?) they might get to the Aa first.

It was getting dark. Beyond the silvery path of the river Steiner could see faint lights and recognised the typical glow of a Russian field camp. They had not been this close before. Some kind of Russian move was in progress. They would leave tonight after the Latvians had posted their one sentry. Steiner would make sure he was looking in the wrong direction when they started to move. The sky was clear so it would be faster with the stars. They would go direct south west. There was now a warmer wind blowing and this seemed to promise that all might be well. By morning Steiner wanted to be two hexes away...”

The Russians were indeed on the march and on 27 March they had returned to the line of the Dvina. At Riga they disarmed the Latvians who covered the northern approaches to the city but in the rural areas to the east and along the south bank of the Dvina, the Latvian lines remained largely intact despite the withdrawal of the Germans.

Altogether, four Russian Armies were moving forward. While, the 1st Army was occupying the northern suburbs of Riga, the whole Russian front from Daugavpils to Vilna was advancing. The Russian North West Front had come out of hibernation at more or less at the same moment the Germans were giving ground. Between 23 – 27 March, movements of up to 60 kilometres were not unusual. At this rate of advance the Russians would be attacking the lines held by the Baltic militias before the end of the month.

This had not been the Tsar's plan. He had reluctantly acquiesced when STAVKA informed him that the North West Front could not be held back and the morale of the men would suffer if they were not allowed to go forward. He had wanted to focus the action on the South West Front. Tragically for Russia, the Tsar allowed the elation of these days, in which no real victory was won, to delude his political judgement. In view of the campaign, the promised elections were postponed until the front was more stable. The news was taken badly in St Petersburg completely cancelling any positive effect of the advance.

The Balkans

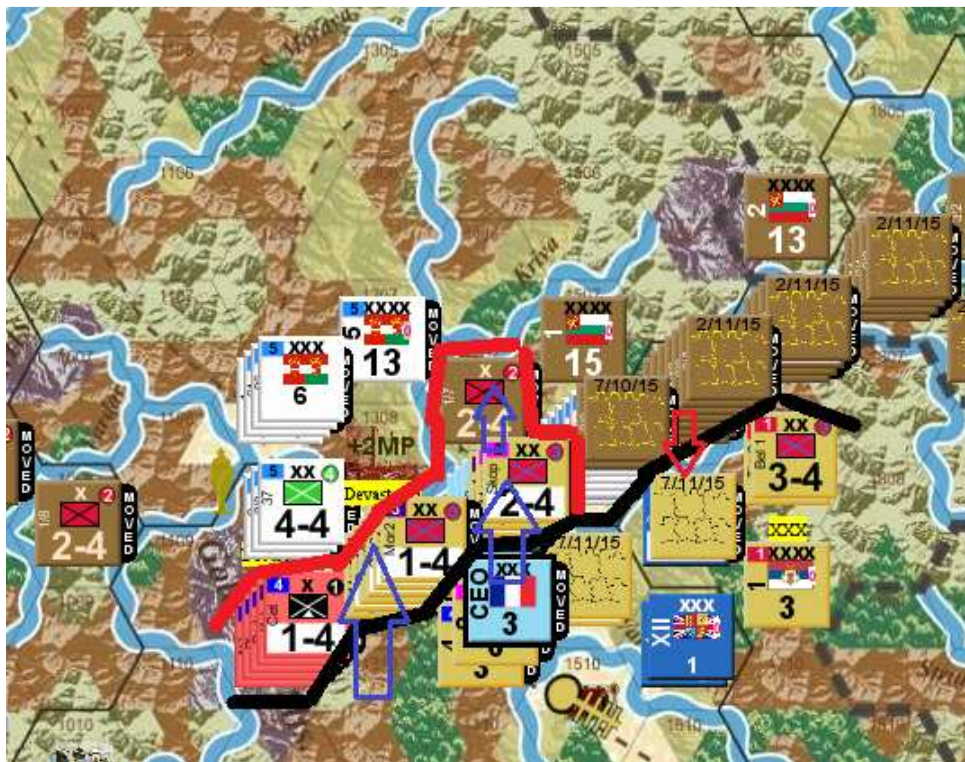


Figure 2: The Allied advance to the Pcinja River, 23 - 27 March 1916.

The Sarrail-Mišić offensive in the Balkans continued to develop. On 24 March, the Central Powers attempted to seize the initiative back with an attack in the Bregalnica Valley south of Shtip (7-6.1608). This was the brainchild of the Bulgarian chief of staff Zhekov who asked for the Bulgarian 1st Army to be supported by the Austrians. In fact it was the Hungarian Brigade of Papp which led the attack and suffered the heaviest losses. Their opponents were British and they prepared to give ground before what initially appeared to be a strong enemy attack. The Central Powers' forces, however, did not exploit their position and by 25 March the British front was restored.

Meanwhile the Franco-Serbian advance had made rapid progress. The concentration at Shtip had drawn the strongest enemy forces east and the Allies, including the French Corps secured the angle between the Vardar and Bregalnica rivers on 25 March without any significant opposition. Mišić then persuaded Sarrail¹ that the Bulgarians were weak in this sector and as a result an attack on 26 March saw the Serbian Macedonian Division drive part of the Bulgarian 7th Division out of Gradmanci (7-6.1407) allowing other Allied units to advance up the Pcinja River. This threatened to make a split in the Central Powers positions and keep the bulk of the Bulgarian and much of the Austrian forces which had gone to Shtip away from the Vardar Valley. It was not impossible to imagine that Skopje itself could be in range of the Allied offensive.

The Near East



Figure 3: Exploitation after the capture of Rize by the Russians, 23 – 27 March 1916.

The situation at Rize was chaotic. The Turks had fallen back inland and they did not contest the coast road. A strong thrust should have opened the Russian way towards Trabzon. In fact only the 3rd Kuban Cossack Brigade was able to advance in that direction. Behind them the Russian cavalry was immobilised due to lack of feed and because of the terrible condition of the roads further back. No supplies were getting through and the headquarters of the I Caucasian Corps was overwhelmed by the breakdown of their logistical system. Roads needed repair and not much would improve until this was addressed.

¹ The French Official History has Sarrail persuading Mišić (Vol XVI p321).

The Western Front

It was universal language on the Western Front to refer to the “Big One” or the “Big Push” when referring to the future offensive which everyone knew was coming. Every change of position was thought to presage the preparations for the “Big One”.

The Italian Front

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	-	-	2		1	16	483	Good
Ottoman	-	-	2	-	1	-		-	3	71	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	1		-	1	17	Good
Central Powers	4	-	17	-	1	3		13	38	1672	
France	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	673	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	-	-	1		-	1	252	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	-	-	1		-	13	1712	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: The strategic withdrawal continues. There is not much else to report from this front this turn.*
- *Balkans: Perhaps my actions in the Balkans this turn are foolish but I choose to execute a combined attack (AH and Bulgarian) against the lone British Div. There is only a single British supply point in range which means the CAttk will necessarily be reduced. I am surprised he did not reinforce the British position with Serbian troops. Then again – knowing Robert’s play – I think he perhaps wanted me to conduct this attack.*
- *West: Quiet again. My strategy in the war overall has been questioned for a lack of offensive action against the French. I cannot fault the logic of the comments made. I made choices based upon holding in the west and hoping for knockout blows to batter down the Russians and ensure a more durable ally in AH. This needed more combat power on the EF and made attacks on the WF largely untenable. At this stage, advancing out of my trenches into open ground to attack the French (in trenches) would likely lead to large losses and also cause a thinning of my lines and the opening of*

greater opportunity for the British. Facing counter attacks from the French and concentrated attacks from the British simultaneously against weakened positions could be devastating.

- *Caucasus: The amphibious assault takes place as a coastal gunnery raid in support of overland offensives and the Russians swept me out of Rize. He can continue to conduct these naval flanking punches as he advances along the coast; but it is a very narrow corridor of advance and does not have me overly concerned yet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet; but I expect him to attack this turn.*

AP: My attack in the Balkans could have been better I have realised. My Franco-Serbian stack with 18 SP could have concluded its move with a column attack at combat strength 9 and a -1 combat DRM. That is enough to force a Bulgarian Brigade to retreat as it is not defending terrain that would allow a stiffened defence. That would allow an advance after the column attack. The Bulgarian unit would have retreated to its HQ but not improved its defence and my force would then be adjacent to both the Bulgarian and Austrian HQs before the combat phase still with 17-18 SP present. There would have been some risk and problem in the follow up attack as the force would be 5 MP from its HQs and the French would be partly unsupplied but I could still have mustered a combat strength of 8 to give a 66.7% chance of destruction of either enemy HQ (-3drm). I probably would have chosen the Austrian one but the Bulgarian HQ represents nearly 10% of their remaining morale and would have been a big blow.

I am sorry I didn't see that. It is easy to miss the possibility of column attack because they are so rarely the required option but this shows again the potential. It also confirms a weak defence is sometimes worse than no defence as it gives a false sense of security.

The chaos a Rize is caused by a double line of devastated ground after I moved forward from my trenches into his trenches. It will be another turn before I begin to restore freedom of movement as the rear devastated hexes are cleared up.

This is all displacement activity. What matters is what happens next on the Western Front and when.