

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT141: 1 – 5 April 1916 (April 1)

General Situation

The attack at Verdun on 28 March had been no minor attack. The fighting around the town continued for over a week. Perhaps the most notable change in the situation was in the air. Up until now the Entente had enjoyed an advantage in the air throughout most of 1915 but this had been largely negated by the turn of the year. Then on 1 April, bright spring sunshine seemed to bring German aircraft into the skies in their hundreds. Suddenly it seemed that the German Air Service had all the best pilots and all the best aircraft. This period was that of the prime of Immelmann and there were increasing reports of a new German air ace, Richthofen, already known as the Red Baron.¹ German aircraft were particularly thick in the air over Verdun. They kept the area clear of French aircraft and did good work spotting for the German artillery.

The Western Front



Figure 1: The Germans shift their axis of attack to the Argonne Forest, 2 - 5 April 1916.

Around Verdun, the infantry assaults let up on 1 April as the Germans were redeploying units to exploit a new direction of attack further to the west by reinforcing their 17th Army. Nevertheless an incessant bombardment continued against the French lines covering Verdun and the French infantry there were worn down by constant alerts and alarms.

¹ The latest edition of this Official History has mentioned above the recent controversy over the true identity of the Red Baron, namely the claim that the German air pioneer Karan von Thraxis und Steinbock impersonated the dead Manfred Richthofen. Further reference to this wild theory is not justified.

The Germans repositioned their infantry very swiftly despite having to move them into the Argonne forest where their tracks were well hidden. The French had so far lost their former air superiority to the Germans that they had no way of predicting the location of next blow. It fell on the French 31st Division which held a section of the line near Beaulieu-en-Argonne (5-3.1916). On 2 April, the Germans attacked again and overwhelmed this part of the French defence. The 31st Division was literally lost in the woods and only a few scattered survivors ever returned to the French lines. Despite this success, the German advance was still slow and the ruptured front was sealed within a few hours by the prompt redeployment of nearby French Divisions.

The French commander of the 4th Army, Gouraud, remained calm during these attacks. Joffre had released some reserves to help strengthen the threatened sector. Most of these were directed towards Verdun itself but there was also support for the Argonne sector. Significantly, Gouraud was able to take advantage of the growing numbers of heavy calibre guns and three whole brigades of artillery were sent to Verdun. This support was confidently expected to be able to challenge the superiority of the Germans in these crucial weapons.

The Italian Front

Conditions were miserable on this front at the beginning of April. The rivers were in flood, camps and even villages were washed away; high winds and snowstorms continued to lash the Alps. The Jet Stream must have come much further to the south that year. A report of the Meteorological Institute of Milan was sent to the Headquarters of every Italian Army. This pointed to increasing evidence of climate change and extreme weather patterns in the Alps. The scientists projections showed that the Alpine glaciers were advancing and would reach Verona and Brescia by 1935²; the whole of the Trentino would be buried by the rising snowpack in less than a century; and Venice and Trieste would suffer from changing sea levels which would see the sea recede several kilometres, depriving these strategic ports of their access to the sea.

These predictions were widely publicised and the truth of them was endorsed by high authorities up to and including the Pope. Everywhere Italians mourned their previous bucolic existence longing for the days when they had every day gambolled through sunny meadows and a Mediterranean climate had been something you could rely upon for year round settled conditions. In the past, April had been characterised by the primavera and the snow was confined to the mountains. Now bad conditions persisted at lower altitudes in the rough zone, the woods and even in the valley floors whether broken or clear. Some of the older folks claimed to have seen this before³ but that only proved how backward these peasants were.

The scientists had very little to offer by way of remedy to these dreadful forecasts. A proposal to try and encourage a warmer spell by burning more fuel and allowing engines to run when not in use was perhaps far sighted but nobody thought Italy had enough coal and oil to offset what was very possibly the imminent return of Ice Age conditions. Some tried to suggest that it would not be so bad and that the ski tourist industry, then still in its infancy, would have a strong boost. However, most considered this optimism to be misplaced and failed to recognise the devastation that would be caused by the extinction of Italian viticulture.

² A typographical error it was later realised. The year 3519 was meant.

³ In 1887 and 1889 but this was before proper records began.

During the “spring” of 1916, the vineyards devoted to production of Pinot Grigio suffered such an appalling die off due to late frosts that the variety never recovered.⁴ No one can now remember this superb wine. We only have the lesser Chianti which survived by a slight margin thanks to its more southerly range (the area of wine decline was chiefly on Map 6-4 of the Italian Cartographic Series).

General Cadorna was nothing if not a scientific officer and he fully embraced the advice of the Meteorological Institute. Firstly, he directed that henceforth all operations must be planned taking climate change into account. This meant that snow shoes came to be issued as standard and smoking was to be encouraged at all times. Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the standing orders issued was the declaration that the function of the Italian Army was re-defined as being to defend Italy from the Austrians and from snow and ice. On this basis, it was as commendable to cause a glacier to retreat as to push back an enemy unit. Flamethrowers were recommended as the ultimate dual purpose weapon (though they proved a disappointment on both accounts). Cadorna further advised the government that the Army had been and would be delayed by the extreme weather in reaching their objectives and they should not be criticised on this account. Finally, he indicated that if present trends continued the Austrians would be forced to give up the Trentino by no later than 1986 because by then the whole region would be too inhospitable for human life. He did not seem to reflect that this might devalue it as a military objective.



Figure 2: Regions of Italian viticulture which suffered climate related damage in the long winter of 1915-1916. Veneto and Chianti recovered after the war but Pinot Grigio was no longer produced. The few surviving reserves laid down were among the most expensive and prestigious wines of the 20th century. The last known bottle was drunk in 1993.

The Eastern Front

The operations of the Russian North West and West Fronts were focused on the lines held by the German armed militias of the Baltic States. OberOst was following a Machiavellian plan in which the defeat of these allies would actually facilitate future German hegemony over this region. Therefore

⁴ It seems the effect of a world war being fought across the region of cultivation was not considered such a significant factor.

when, on 3 – 5 April, the Russians unleashed a final attack on the Latvian and Lithuanian militias there was no German support for the defenders and they were all crushed.

The Polish militia were made of sterner stuff and they were still keeping the Russians at bay at the end of the first week of April. This may have been because the Russian West Front (6th and 7th Armies) was slower in preparing attacks than the Armies further north.



Figure 3: The Russian West Front held up by Polish militia and the insurrection at Bialystok, 1 - 5 April 1916.

The situation in eastern Poland was complicated also by an outbreak of pro-Russian resistance at Bialystok. Bialystok had been noted in the 19th century as the only town in Poland where Tsarism was popular and it benefitted from the fact that many of its leading citizens were rewarded by rapid promotion in the main institutions of the state, including the government, civil service and army. The head of the Russian railway board for many years was a native of Bialystok and it was consequently one of the best connected rail junctions on the whole Russian rail network. On 3 April, the Polish

militia formed in Bialystok had been left with responsibility to guard the city as the German garrison had left a week earlier. Uniquely this militia swapped sides believing incorrectly the Russian Army was approaching. They seized some German stores and ripped up the rail lines around their city. By 5 April it had been confirmed that the nearest Russian units were over 90 kilometres away and the Bialystok insurrection was looking somewhat isolated and vulnerable.

The Balkans

The Allied offensive now reached a climatic point. The retreats of the Central Powers were still opening up opportunities for the Allies to advance in eastern Macedonia so that they secured the environs of the Kriva Hills (7-6.1507) and Kamenitsa (7-6.1607) which was occupied by the British 3rd Division on 5 April. However, these advances were in the opposite direction to Skopje which was almost in range of Allied guns and the Serbs in particular could not be restrained from their desire to do their best to recapture it.

Sarrail advised that a preliminary attack should be made with the aim of seizing Kumanovo (7-6.1307) to the east of Skopje where the enemy line was thinnest. There was hope that the enemy line could be ruptured. Sarrail offered the support of the whole French Expeditionary Corps to help the success of this effort which began with new Serbian attacks on 4 April. The advance of the Macedonian Division was almost fanatical and the Allies had the advantage of numbers. The Hungarian 61st Brigade was hammered by powerful French and Serbian attacks so that by 5 April there were few survivors of this unit. Only a small rearguard of Bulgarians who had supported the Hungarians kept the Macedonian Division out of Kumanovo that evening.

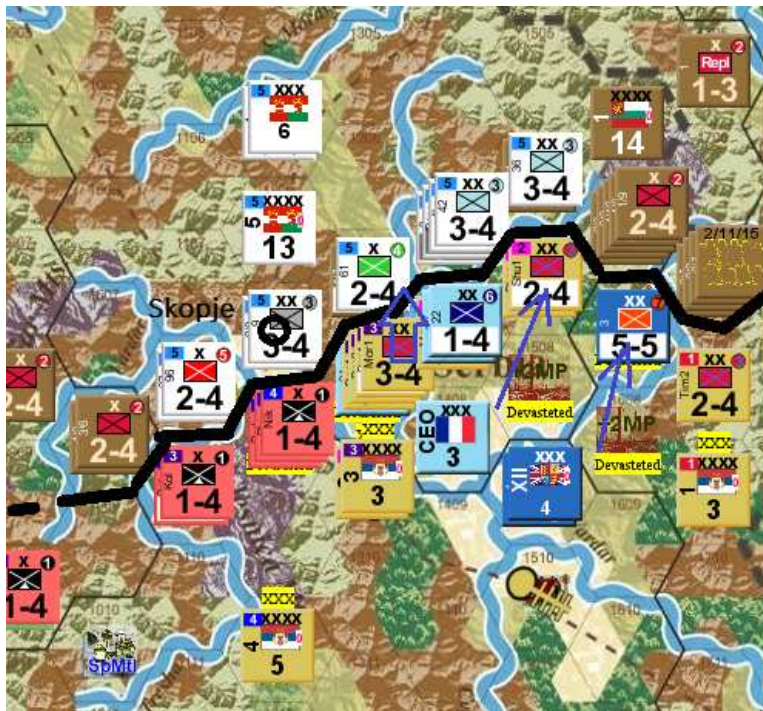


Figure 4: The conflict in Macedonia at the time of the Kumanovo attack, 4 - 5 April 1916.

The Near East

The logistical problems in operating in both the Sinai and Mesopotamia had caused the British to send vast numbers of Labour Corps recruits to these theatres. In April 1916, the first work was commenced on new railroads originating from Basra and Qurna. While it might be thought that the

flooding would facilitate the supply of the army at Kut the opposite was the case. The floods spread the water over a wide area and the main channels of the rivers became indistinct and treacherous. Only vessels of shallow draft could operate in these conditions. Despite this, the British had accumulated enough river craft to establish a second flotilla on the Tigris and this initially was stationed between Abu Gharbi and Kut.

In the Caucasus, the Russians were making some further moves forward. The Turks had retreated some distance in the Coruh Valley and the Russian III Caucasian Corps followed. The Russians were also still building up strength on the Black Sea coast in preparation for further attacks planned there. However, these continued to be delayed by the difficulties of the terrain and the problems of moving troops forward from Batum to Rize.

DM Summary – April 1916

| Nation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Food Deficit | Month | Total | Morale |
|------------------------|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|--------------|-------|-------|--------|
| Germany | 8 | | | | | | | 12 | 20 | 1153 | Good |
| Austria-Hungary | 2 | | | | | | | 1 | 3 | 486 | Good |
| Ottoman | - | | | | | | | - | - | 71 | Good |
| Bulgaria | - | | | | | | | - | - | 17 | Good |
| Central Powers | 10 | | | | | | | 13 | 23 | 1707 | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| France | 10 | | | | | | | - | 10 | 691 | Good |
| Great Britain | - | | | | | | | - | - | 252 | Good |
| Russia | - | | | | | | | - | - | 733 | Shaken |
| Italy | - | | | | | | | - | - | 62 | Good |
| Belgium | - | | | | | | | - | - | (105) | NA |
| Serbia | (1) | | | | | | | - | - | (33) | NA |
| Entente | 10 | | | | | | | - | 10 | 1730 | |

Player Notes

CP: *The food deficit remains a constant with 12 DM against Germany and 2 against AH⁵. Most notably, both AH and Germany again load weapons to Turkey to enable her to raise new divisions, artillery and cavalry for those sweeping desert opportunities.*

- *East: The strategic withdrawal continues in the north but remains fairly consistent further south. There is a lot of movement but not much opportunity for any attack. There is also no imperative for Russia to take the offensive anywhere.*
- *Balkans: Quiet again as most of my forces continue with a gradual withdrawal.*
- *West: I believe I am yet to execute an attack with any luck against France. Since the heady days of 1914, I have been worsted in just about every attack – as I was again in my last attack on Verdun, which has now also been strongly reinforced. I want to keep*

⁵ RL calculate 1 for AH not 2.

some pressure on so shift the attack to the SW of Verdun where his trenches are more weakly held. Success here may even compel him to vacate Verdun. Unlikely, but not impossible. In support of this attack by the 17th Army with 16th Army attachments, artillery elements continue to bombard Verdun with harassing fire.

- *Caucasus: Quiet.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: I am expecting an attack this month but all I can do is make minor dispositions.*

AP: The latest German attacks found a relative weak point in my line adjacent to Verdun and extended the attack with a continuing bombardment against the Verdun hex. This gave in total combat strength of 117 vs 39 and I only had a single counterattack. German air power suddenly made the situation significantly harder for the French.

On the Italian front I am still inhibited by winter weather. I wanted to attack the Austrian fort at Lavarone (6-4.2218) but I would incur the Italian winter penalty of attacking into clear, broken, woods or rough (SR 34-5) and the reduction in combat strength would mean my bombardment with 10 Artillery SP could not guarantee a hit. This is partly because the terrain (-3), trenches (-2) and my artillery bonus (+3) would still have a -2 combat modifier. If this is right I think I have discovered a way in which trenches in very bad terrain can give a benefit which exceeds the usual (-4) limit.

In relation to Iraq it might be wondered if the historic Kut campaign is possible. I have not fully studied this but I think it is possible. First a British lunge to Baghdad at the end of 1915 makes sense because the British have to go where the Turks are to inflict damage and the Turks can pull them north and stretch their logistics. Equally, the British should keep up the attrition around Baghdad to the maximum extent that safety/supply allows because the priority is maximum damage on the Turks and their own losses are secondary considerations.

Maintaining a forward position during the flood is not safe because reinforcements and supply will have difficulty in coming upriver. In this game, I had a fresh division come up to Kut just before the flood started. During the flood, the British have to hold in one or more of the dry patches by the river. Kut is one such position which also benefits from a possible retreat route to Abu Gharbi through the desert to the south west of the river. To surround Kut and cut off its Line of Communication the Turks have to cut the river below Kut and deal with the alternate supply route to Abu Gharbi. Ottoman units are in supply only when within 2 hexes of the river, but the Ottomans do not suffer the movement penalty for moving Out of Supply (OH 3-12a). Therefore they have the possibility of advancing around Kut through the deserts so long as they can survive the monthly attrition (OH3-12b) which can be negated with supply (OH3-12c). Whether such a move could succeed depends on the ability of the British to defend their line of communication but all it takes is a Turkish unit able to reach the river somewhere far enough south to stop the river being used for supply.

In the Balkans, I had not at all expected this recent opportunity to advance. I am practically half-way to Sofia albeit mainly because the CP has allowed it. I do not always follow up CP retreats but this is one I am prepared to do because I do not fear counterattacks. I have some Serbian replacements on their way. I could never have advanced so far purely with my limited combat power as I would have quickly run out of supply. My mobility decreases away from Greece but in the long run I would try and maintain this position. When Romania comes in it will be harder for the CP to ignore the South

Balkans and I will save my main effort for that conjunction later this year. Ivor has indicated aversion to fighting the Serbs because they do not suffer DM. That is a reason for the CP to dislike combat with the Serbs but it should be remembered that they only have enough manpower production to build six SP per year when they have control of one or fewer cities.