

## **Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game**

**GT142: 6 – 9 April 1916 (April 2)**

### **General Situation**

Many historians point to the first months of 1916 as the period in which the war turned against the Central Powers. They were in a situation of siege beset on all sides by powerful enemies who were slowly getting more powerful. Even Russia and Serbia were showing signs of revival at least in comparison with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The KuK Army was in a declining state and the Austrian economy was increasingly vulnerable.

The German High Command was torn between a defensive policy and the temptation (or was it necessity) of striking pre-emptively at the gathering foes. As each month passed there was a slow bleed of morale as the war situation showed no sign of dramatic change and therefore of no improvement. Solutions were offered on all sides. Artillery production was expanded. More aid was sent to Turkey. Advice was given to Austria to improve the efficiency of the distribution of food resources.

The worst of it, the Kaiser confessed, was the waiting. It was obvious enough that the British and French would sooner or later make a very substantial attack. The Italians had also been saving themselves for a major effort. What would happen, he asked Falkenhayn, if all these powers struck at the same time? What if the Russians and Serbians joined in and could Romania and Greece really be trusted to stay out? The Kaiser noted the quietness of most of the Allied fronts. This was an ominous form of silence that indicated something very big was brewing.

### **The Western Front**

Joffre and Haig met in the Elysée Palace in Paris on 8 April and their staffs swapped plans for the forthcoming offensive. There had of course been weeks of preparation for this moment but the meeting involved a critical evaluation of how well coordinated their efforts would be.

The most important decision was to confirm a start date for the Allied offensive. Russian and Italian emissaries were present also because what was wanted was a united Allied effort. The Italians presented little difficulty, but the Russian delegates were evasive and some greater flexibility would be needed in view of their slower preparations.

In detail, all the different staffs present had a common concern which was to maximise their artillery resources. Intelligence suggested the Germans were still far better stocked with ammunition. Everyone wanted more shells, more gun barrels, more real and dummy batteries, and more training to ensure the best coordination between infantry and artillery. That training would now be intensified as the countdown to the Allied attack began.

Haig and Joffre had both recently rested with a spell of leave, and there was a positive energy in the Allied headquarters as all remaining difficulties were to be overcome. Joffre was concerned that the German air force had gained a distinct advantage in this period but he assured Haig that the German attacks around Verdun would not affect their joint plans. These attacks had in any event ceased a few days before the Elysée meeting.

## The Italian Front

The stillness on the Italian front was also very unnerving. Whenever an occasional shot rang out the sound carried enormous distances. Those who knew the mountains would immediately think of avalanches and study their situation for the threat. Most of those in the armies did not have that knowledge. However, in 1916, the extended cold spell delayed the start of the avalanche season and accidents were still rare.

## The Eastern Front



Figure 1: The Russian South West Front and their Austrian opponents, 6 - 9 April 1916.

The confrontation between the Polish Militias and the Russian 6th and 7th Armies in north east Poland was intensifying. A series of Russian raids between 8 – 9 April broke up the Polish cordon and

devastated large parts of the countryside. On 8 April, a column from the Russian 58th Reserve Division occupied Grodno. This was enough to get the unit commander mentioned in despatches despite the fact that the Russians had been opposed by no more than a handful of naïve nationalists who abandoned their position as soon as they spotted the approaching enemy force. The public account turned a rather messy irregular conflict against what were little more than civilians in arms into something which fitted better with traditional heroic narratives of war.

The Russians were in any event more interested in the southern sections of the front. The Tsar and Brusilov were collaborating to build up the Russian South West Front in order to turn the war back against the Austrians. Under pressure also from the Western Allies to confirm offensive plans this still seemed the most promising area for the Russians to attack. Whereas the rest of the front had been shifting backwards and forwards all winter and devastating communications and infrastructure, in the south the front had been stable and the Russians had a good line of entrenchments which could be a useful position from which to strike the Hapsburgs and recover Galicia. There was a steady build-up of reinforcements directed to this front but, in April, Brusilov was still dissatisfied with the ammunition reserves and advised the Tsar that, if the decision was his, he, Brusilov, would not start action for at least two or three months.

## The Balkans



Figure 2: The Liberation of Skopje, 8 April 1916.

Joffre had sent General Sarrail to the Balkans in order to remove a rival from the Western Front. This had backfired because while Joffre appeared to be doing nothing in France, Sarrail had within a few weeks won a significant Allied victory in his new post. At least General Sarrail's influential supporters in France thought he deserved all the credit for what was in reality a joint Franco-Serbian success.

By the end of the first week of April, the Allies had been closing in on Skopje. The advance up the Pcinja Valley had continued as the Austrians made withdrawals there on 6 – 7 April giving up Kumanovo (7-6.1307). The Bulgarian 2nd Army attempted diversionary operations on 7 April with an attack in the remote Breznitsa Forest (7-6.2007) near the frontier between Serbia and Bulgaria. This succeeded in roughly handling the Serbia Obrenovac Brigade but it was too far from Skopje to make any difference. On the morning of 8 April, three Serbian Divisions streamed through and around



## 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	-	1						-	1	18	Good
Central Powers	10	1						13	24	1708	
France	10	-						-	10	691	Good
Great Britain	-	-						-	-	252	Good
Russia	-	-*						-	-	733	Shaken - *Grodno recaptured
Italy	-	-						-	-	62	Good
Belgium	-	-						-	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	(1)	(1) *						-	-	(33)	NA – *Skopje recaptured
Entente	10	-						-	10	1730	

### Player Notes

CP: *I had forgotten to roll for gas and air at the start of the month. As it turns out, the Germans got air supremacy which should help somewhat.*

- *East: The Russians continue to edge forward gingerly whilst I hold a reasonably steady line which can continue to fall back or seize any offensive opportunity which may present itself.*
- *Balkans: A successful Anglo-Serbian attack last turn wiped out a Hungarian brigade and forced me to fall back more rapidly than I would like. His forces here are weakest in the east, so I attack two weak Serbian brigades with Bulgarian troops. I dislike attacking Serbs as it is a zero sum game for me. However, by so doing and weakening one of his flanks, it may deny him opportunity to concentrate in his own locations of choice.*
- *West: Once again, even with air power and significant artillery, I come off badly with a WF attack. All debate aside, fortune has favoured none of my offensive activity on the WF. Little wonder I still hold out hope of damaging the Russians irreparably ahead of historical schedule.*
- *Caucasus: Quite a bit of shifting this turn. I have fresh supplies inloading and have concentrated some force along the coast to deter his advances there. With supply, I may even be able to counter-attack.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: I have asked myself why I am defending right on the broad border with Sinai. Why am I? It holds value only if I wished to launch an offensive into the Sinai. I don't – let*

*him come across the desert to me. So I have started to withdraw to where the mountains come closest to the coast to concentrate my defences there.*

- *Italy: A waiting game for AH.*

*AP: I have settled on the timing of the Allied offensive. I will not say now when it is whether it is near or far but I will see whether I stick to it. The date reflects the balance between maintaining the pressure I still have on the CP by Rule 22 and my need to accelerate the action. I also want a major action to begin when I have almost maximum resources.*

*Once I begin, there will be rapid developments.*

*The Austrians are now at 485+ DM and they are vulnerable to Russian Artillery surprise. This is nevertheless a one turn only opportunity so I will not do it until the opportunity is a good one. I will want to have some attempts to get the "Sad State of the Austrian XX Army" in effect too and that requires rolling at the beginning of a month. That will make it possible to fairly quickly reach 550 DM to bring in the Romanians and give AH Shaken Morale. The Germans will then have to do more to save Austria as AH Economic Collapse is just 600 DM so that will be within reach as well. Nor can the Austrians allow DM to rise much more than 600 DM because in 1916 they surrender at DM 700 and in subsequent years they only have an extra 100 DM to play with per year.*

*Ivor was wise to reconsider his front line in Palestine. It looks like defending in the desert is a good idea but the hills are better. The previous time I played this game to this point, the Turks suffered a disaster by attempting to hold some distance into Sinai. Even with summer attrition, the British were able to win there and when the Turks tried to break contact they found the desert and summer movement penalties wouldn't allow it.*