Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT146: 23 – 26 April 1916 (April 6)

General Situation

If Coalitions had expressions, it might have been possible to detect a glimmer of concern cross the face of the Entente in late April 1916. Preparations for the Grand Allied Offensive had been ongoing for months and it was expected that the Allies would take the initiative very soon. Yet instead, the Central Powers were undertaking major attacks in France and on the Eastern Front. Joffre had refused to admit anxieties about the German attacks in the Argonne, but the intensity of the German efforts had not declined and they had been maintained over nearly a month. There were also significant shifts in the Eastern Front not at all to the advantage of the Russians. It was practically impossible for the Western staffs to get a sensible assessment of the situation from STAVKA and consequentially the old doubts about the Russian commitment began to resurface once again.

The Western Front

Joffre went to inspect the Argonne sector in person on 25 April and decided on the spot to place Gouraud under the command of Pétain who had been Sarrail's successor commanding the French 3rd Army. A French Army Group was therefore created with responsibility for the critical sectors in Eastern France between the Argonne and Nancy.

In the previous two days, further strong German attacks had been made in the thickest parts of the Argonne Forest (5-3.1916). The German 4th Army had joined the German 17th Army in this two day effort in which great trees were splintered until they were matchsticks. The terrain here was more difficult than the Germans had faced at Possesse (5-3.1816) in their last assault. Gouraud did not insist that every position be held only that they be retaken by counterattack within 24 hours. The French were getting wise to the caution of the German infantry and they were not averse to abandoning front line trenches which might be shelled if they could be reoccupied later.

Pétain wanted more French artillery to support the infantry. This was frustrated for the moment by Gouraud's earlier deployments which had prioritised the defence of Verdun. There was some argument among the French commanders on 25 – 26 April because of disagreement in whether the Germans would return to attack Verdun in which case Gouraud's precautions should be maintained. Pétain did not like this and sought to persuade Joffre that the heavier guns should move closer to where the fighting was.

The Italian Front

Although the Italian press liked to characterise the encirclement of Lavarone (6-4.2218) as a siege, the Hapsburg military press bureau denied there was any siege at all. They published maps showing that Lavarone remained firmly connected to the rest of the line and they insisted that no more than an occasional shell was ever launched at the fortress which had so far suffered negligible damage.

One episode which Vienna did not publicise was an attempt to send a battalion of mountain artillery to Lavarone from Trent on 24 April. This unit found all the passes under fire from the Italians and the

attempt was abandoned on 25 April when it returned to Trent. A report of the Chief-of-Staff of the Army of Tyrol advised that only mountain infantry and their light guns were suitable for the Lavarone sector and heavy artillery should be reserved for the defence of Trent.

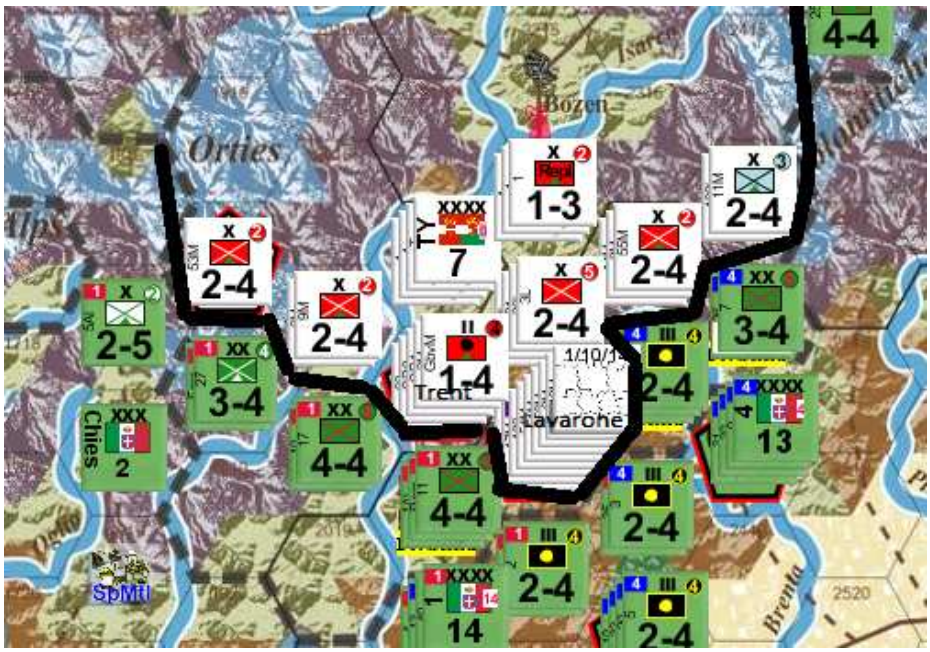

Figure 1: The static semi-siege of Lavarone, 23 – 26 April 1916.

The Eastern Front

The German advances on the Eastern Front began to pick up some real momentum in late April. The Russians were in rapid retreat and the Germans pursued as best they could. The movement of the German 10th Army towards Riga caught the Russian 1st Army by surprise and led to a rear guard action on 24 April at Daugmale (4-5N.1405) where the Russians covered three Divisions who were withdrawing to the north bank of the Dvina.

North of the Pripet Marshes, the German advance was general and there was little Russian resistance. Vilna was recaptured by the German 87th Division on 24 April without a fight.

The Battle of Volhynia which had been bubbling away for months was becoming more violent. The Austro-Hungarian 1st Army had gained a large bridgehead across the Styr River north of Luck. However, the most vicious fighting continued to be undertaken by the Austro-Hungarian 4th and German Sud Armies with the Austro-Hungarian 2nd Army starting to provide support on the left. The Austrians attacked on 23 – 24 April at Yampol (5-5.4406) where the Russian 3rd Army had extended its right flank to conform to the more ambitious movements of the Russian 5th and 9th Armies further west. Conrad considered that if the Russian 3rd Army could be defeated the other Russian Armies being more exposed would have to withdraw. The Austrian attacks were being supported by generous quantities of supply and their artillery hammered the unfortunate Russian infantry which were forced into giving up ground. Nevertheless, fresh Russian reserves were moved forward equally quickly and by 26 April the line facing the Austrians was as strong as ever.

The political mood in Russia was already febrile and the news of retreats and heavy fighting threatened to sour the atmosphere in which the Tsar was trying to manage both military and political events. One point of vulnerability he had was the growing unpopularity of his German wife.

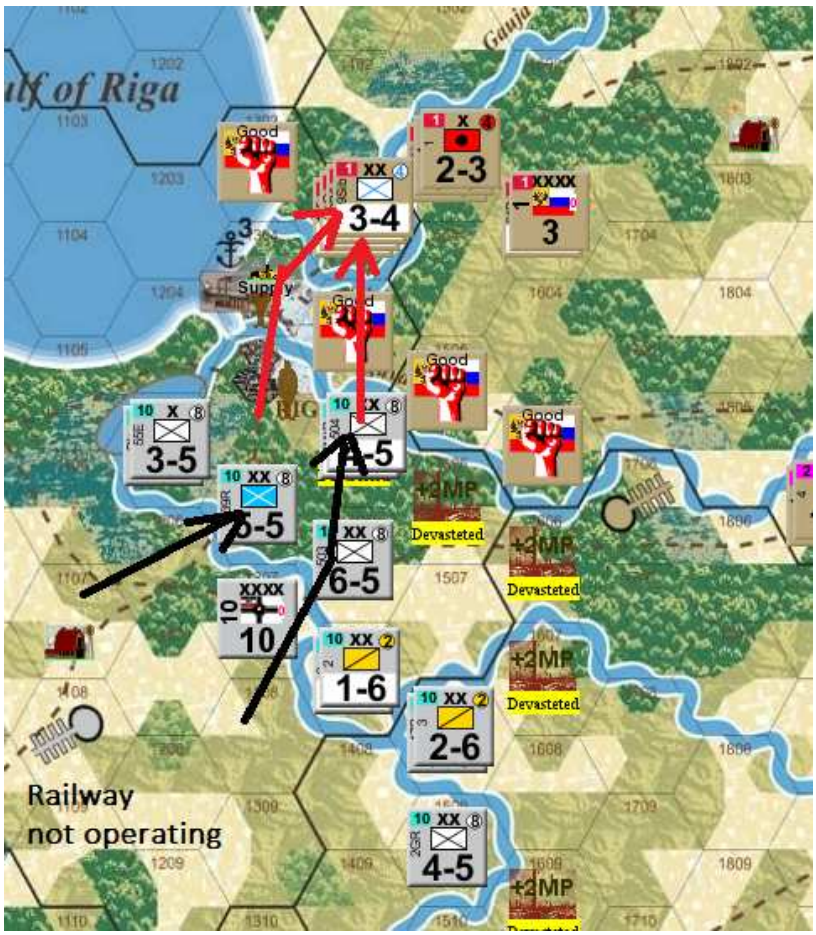

Figure 2: The German 10th Army returns to the Dvina River, 23 – 26 April 1916.

To try and clear the air, the Tsarist police arrested some of the more disreputable persons known to hang around the Tsarina. This, the Tsar reasoned was for her own benefit. A transcript of an interview with one of these courtiers has recently been published in the memoirs of a British officer who spent some time in Russia during this period. [1]

"I felt an ice cold spasm of fear that ran the length of my jellified spine as the door to my cell slowly opened. My upbringing was responsible for this. When but a child I had been terrified by stories of the tortures which my father, Sir Harry Flashman VC, had endured in Russian captivity. I had tried to work through those nightmares at school by recreating the same scenes with me as the gaoler and my smaller schoolmates as the victims. This was before they sent troubled children to speak to Austrian analysts. Now the tables were turned. I was a drooling wreck pleading with the walls to let me through.

[1] *This is an extract from the memoirs of the younger Flashman, his father (of the same name) being Sir Harry Flashman VC a famous Victorian soldier and adventurer. The full story is published as "Flashman the Second and the Tsarina", (2013), Peahen Press.*

My father told me there was only one thing to do in such a tight spot which was to offer to spill the beans at the first chance or else there wouldn't be much of a Flashman remaining to flash around at a later date. The difficulty was working out what they wanted to know.

Since at first I did not dare open my eyes, my visitor was quite in the cell and seated comfortably before I took a peak. The first thing I noticed was that he had a bottle of vodka with him and he was pouring two glasses to share. Alcohol is one of my few sources of courage and in snatching at his offering I was distracted from immediately pleading for mercy.

"I am P…P…P…Police Commandant Porfiry P…P…P…Petrovich and the Head of the Investigation Department" announced my new companion who agreeably poured another drink into my grateful glass. He was a well-dressed and pleasant looking man and I could see none of the thumbscrews or eye-scoops that my pa had spoken of. I relaxed very slightly.

"You are a B…B…B…British officer? Why are you not serving on the Western Front?"

To combat his stutter, Porfiry almost sang his words. It was a most unusual trait.

I had to consider my answer. The true one was that I had been on the Western Front. I was commissioned in the same regiment of Lancers as my father but a scheming aunt with an interest in (my) life insurance had engineered a transfer to a "keen" infantry battalion in which the life expectancy of officers had been typically only a few weeks in the autumn of the previous year. Fortunately, there had been a lull for several months during the winter and I had avoided serious danger. However, everyone knew that Haig, damn him, was preparing an offensive against the strongest part of the German line. God, what idiots these top brass are. Jerry was obviously waiting for us to attack, asking us to attack, completely ready for us, with line after line of trenches bristling with every weapon that humanity had devised. We could do so many things: find a weak point; feign a retreat; ask the French to go first; or just bomb and shell the Germans until they went home, even if it took twenty years. But no, that is not what we will do. We are going to run across no-man's land and the few survivors of that little race can then get killed in the first German trench. Well Flash wasn't going to do that was he?

What did I do? First I pulled more string than was stockpiled in the Pullman's Twine and Rope Factory. Then I faked every ailment in the medical dictionary with increasing desperation as the date of the offensive loomed.[2] *Nothing seemed able to counter the malign influence of my aunt, not even a decent stab at elephantitis which was dismissed by the ignorant battalion doctor as athlete's foot.*

The Colonel was set against transfers and he knew I was in a funk. I was certainly assigned to the spearhead (suicide) company until a small miracle occurred. It was blackmail. I should have realised from the start that I would need to play that card. My last reserve was some recollections of the time when I had been a bit thick with the Prince of Wales in some club land forays before the war. This was the trick I needed and I was then summoned to London pretty sharpish. They made sure I handed over all the photographs I had and insisted that I would have to make myself scarce in distant parts. Well that suited me fine and I was not at all bothered that I would have to go to Russia and help out, as they suggested, with a tricky situation that only I had the right skills for. I didn't find out what it was until I was half way to St Petersburg.

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[2] Flashman could not have known it, as the date of the 1916 offensive was still a closely guarded secret.

My reflections were disturbed by Porfiry who was trying to repeat his question but was stuck on the first consonant.

"I am a liaison officer to be attached to the Russian Staff. My papers were taken from me."

"*Your pa…pa…papers seem to be in order, but we still have some questions. I have read your statement. It seems that you did not report to headquarters when you arrived in St Petersburg. According to your statement, during the last three weeks you stayed at the house of Prince Andrew Bolkonski; were introduced to society by Anna Pavlovna Scherer; are close friends with Count Pierre Bezukhov; and have been a regular visitor of the Rostov family. Do you suppose, Captain Flashman, that we Russians might not be familiar with our own literature?"*

Flashman had forgotten the statement which he had written in a drugged delirium hoping it would secure his immediate release when he was first brought to this loathsome prison in the early hours of the previous night.

"It is pure fiction is it not?"

I bridled a bit at that. Damn the War Office! A copy of War and Peace was the only preparation I had been given for this mission – and also, a biography of Catherine the Great. That was supposed to instruct me on the possible weaknesses of German princesses when transplanted to Russia.

"As an officer, I do not think I have to account for my private engagements when I am off duty."

"*Are you off duty Mr Flashman? What about your companion, Mr Riley, who is he*?"

"*Just someone I met on the boat. He is not a companion. He is a commercial traveller. He helped me get tickets for the train to St Petersburg that is all."*

"*Have you seen his card?*"

"No."

"Here it is, [reading] Sidney Reilly: The Ace of Spies."

"What real spy would have such a card? It is clearly nonsense."

"*And yet Mr Flashman, you were in Sarajevo the summer before last when the Archduke was assassinated?"*[3]

"On a driving holiday…"

"*Who goes to Sarajevo for a holiday? You were accompanied by a known German spy, Miss Mata Hari. Your name was mentioned in the interrogation of G…G…G…Gavrilo Princip…"*

"*Well yes…He tried to kill me, the love-sick puppy." I had to admit it was an excursion full of incident.*

"Maybe, but the thing is which side does that put you on? You are found wearing the Archduke's clothes; his plan for world peace is torn up and used to light your cigars; the German spy disappears;

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[3] Flashman the Second and the Assassins (2010), Peahen Press.

and the Serbian secret service thinks you played a little ruse on them. Monsieur Apis would like to speak to you after I am finished, and I have heard he is not so gentle?

The mention of that Serbian sadist sent a new chill down my spine and brought out the jaundice that often affected my belly. Surely he was not here in St Petersburg? I had no wish to repeat the kind of things Apis had visited on me in that Sarajevan bathhouse.

As I tried to restart my circulation, Porfiry closed in on his main point.

"Why did you seek an audience with the Sa…Sa…Sa…Tsarina?"

"*To pay my respects and inform her of a cure my father once brought back from Borneo. It may have helped with an ailment which affects the Imperial Family."*

That was a long way short of the whole truth. I couldn't just come out and say the Tsarina was a German agent, in league with Bolsheviks, and was suspected by His Majesty's Government of plotting to withdraw Russia from the war. Neither could I say that my true aim had been to compromise the Tsarina so thoroughly that she would never have influence over Russian policy and diplomacy ever again.

Porfiry spoke, "C….C…Can I suggest you saw the Tsarina because the British government thinks she is a German agent, in league with Bolsheviks, and is suspected of plotting to withdraw Russia from the war and that you aimed to compromise her so thoroughly that she would never have influence over Russian policy and diplomacy ever again."

This terrified me. The devious Russians were somehow reading my mind word for word. What diabolical contraption did they have that would allow that? I realised I might as well confess and hope for lenient treatment and offered to do so. Porfiry thanked me but said there was no need. He showed me where I had written what he had just said at the end of my statement written the night before.

Porfiry then asked, "Did you perhaps meet a priest at the Imperial Palace?"

I had met a priest, "*Rasputin? Yes a sinister chap always hanging around the Tsarina*."

I reflected that the plan had almost worked. At first I feared the Tsarina was not the sort of girl that Flashy's charms usually worked on. To put it bluntly she was a bit prim and proper and a teetotaller too and her children kept getting in the way. If she might be susceptible to a smouldering passion for one of the best specimens the British Cavalry had ever produced (after my pater) she kept it well buttoned up. However, when I asked whether the Tsarina shared many of the tastes of Catherine the Great, her fellow German, I thought I saw a slight reddening of the Empress' cheeks. She cast a little glance at the pesky priest as if to indicate that if only the man of the cloth would leave she would be in all readiness to learn more about the riding skills of the Lancers. That was enough for me to internally sound the "Charge".

Finally, the Tsarevitch and the Tsarabitches[4] *were in bed, and I thought I would be alone with the Tsarina (well apart from the 30,000 servants running up and down the corridors). I told her that if we*

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[4] *Although this is disgracefully disrespectful of the Russian princesses, the Russian Royal family might not have survived the events of the following years but for the fortuitous and almost accidental intervention of Captain Flashman (then Colonel Flashman) during a later visit to Siberia as recounted in the subsequent volume of his memoirs: Flashman the Second and the Revolution, (Peahen Press, 2015).*

could have a private moment, I would reveal the secret my father had brought back from Borneo. It was an old trick and, was I not a true Flashman, I might be ashamed to admit the number and variety of women to whom it had proved to be a key to their chambers.

However, at the end, the priest Rasputin was still there. Nothing would induce him to disappear. Finally, I let him serve tea as a nightcap and then at long last it appeared he had gone. I was alone with the Tsarina as the clock struck the midnight hour. Whatever happened next she would not survive the scandal. All I had to do was let nature take its course. I started to loosen my collar because, as I noticed, it was strangely hot in the palace. I was breaking out into a sweat because of the tightness of my uniform. I thought it would be best for all if we disrobed swiftly. Catherine the Great had shown little patience in these matters.

Nature's next course was upon me pretty damn quick. I looked as the Tsarina went out of proper focus and then retched violently and passed out. I came around no longer hot but chilled and in a raving delirium of fear and confusion as I was being driven into this clink.

By now I knew, "It was Rasputin wasn't it? He must have drugged me with the tea."

Porfiry replied somewhat tunefully, "Ra..Ra..Rasputin is the lover of the Russian Queen. If you had done any proper homework, you British meddlers might have known that. There is no need for you to disgrace her. Rasputin will finish that work very soon and I do not suppose he wants any help from you. You will be allowed to leave here. I will take care of Monsieur Apis. You can see him another time. You will convey our compliments to the British Government, but tell them we can sort out our own problems."

The Balkan Front

Having forced the French Marine Brigade to withdraw from villages on the western bank of the Struma River, the Bulgarian 2nd Army moved forward in greater strength. By 24 April they had a sizeable bridgehead having advanced up to 18 kilometres from the river. Serbian reinforcements were headed to this corner of south western Bulgaria but, since they were some way distant, the Bulgarians had a few days to consolidate their gains.

The Near East

As it became more certain that the Turks were planning to make their main stand in front of Jerusalem and not at Gaza, General Murray consulted with his staff on the implications of this development. Murray was troubled by the advice of the Quartermaster of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force who indicated that it would not be until September that an adequate logistical structure could extend the line of communication all the way to the Holy City. Equally troubling was the thought that Jerusalem might be the scene of a major battle. Murray had wondered at the Turkish decision to withdraw so far, but it was certainly restricting his options and delaying the impact of the advance of his command.

In the Caucasus, Yudenitch suspended the Russian offensive after the heavy losses of the latest attacks were reported. The advance through Rize had reached its limits and it was fruitless to continue battering at a door the Turks had firmly shut.

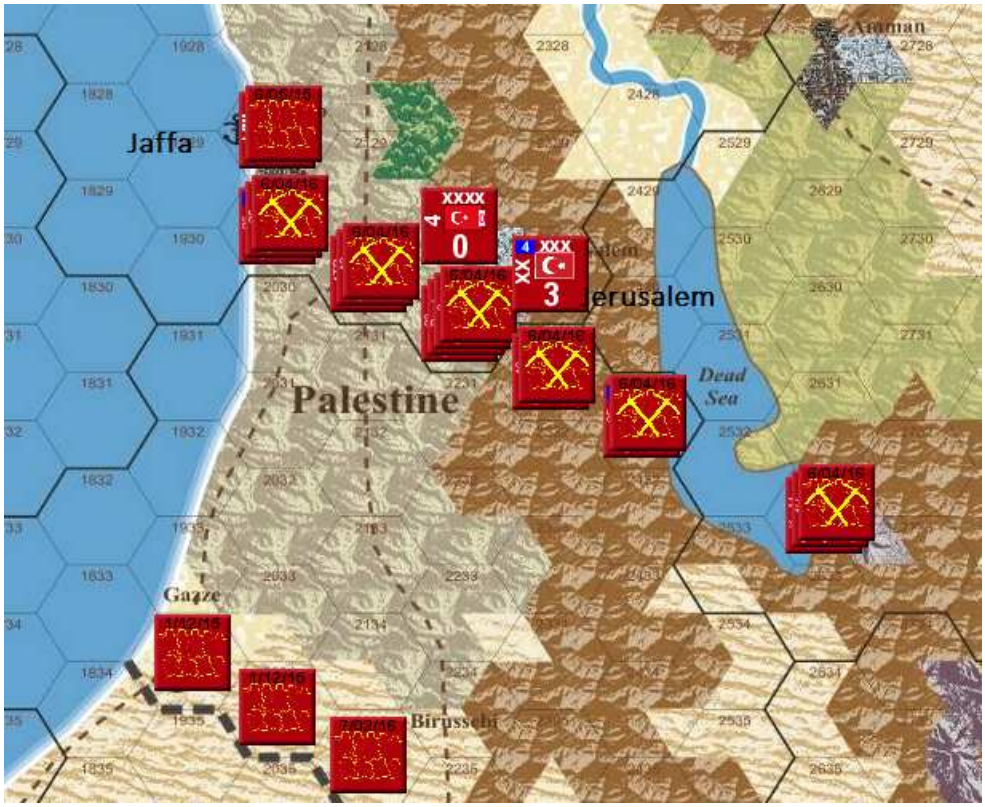

Figure 3: The Turks digging in on the Jaffa-Jerusalem Line, 23 - 26 April 1916.

DM Summary – April 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	8	-	-	8	3	9		12	41	1173	Good
Austria-Hungary	2	-	-	-	5	4		1	12	495	Good
Ottoman	-	-	-	-	1	-		-	1	72	Good
Bulgaria	-	1	-	1	-	-		-	2	19	Good
Central Powers	10	1	-	9	9	13		13	55	1739	
France	10	-	-	7	7	7		-	31	712	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	252	Good
Russia	-	-*	-	2	12 **	9$		-	23	756	Shaken - *Grodno recaptured and **lost again $Vilna lost
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	62	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	(1)	(1) *	-	-	-	-		-	-	(33)	NA – *Skopje recaptured
Entente	10	-	-	9	19	16		-	54	1774	

Player Notes

- CP*: East: I use this turn to group the German EF armies ensuring that a combination of terrain and ZOCs close off any opportunities for Russians to lap around the flanks to allow me to start closing up with some of the Russian forces. I am determined to try and force some combat on him before he slips away eastwards again. He lacks supply in the northern reaches of his armies and I hope that be forcing combat on him – and thus inducing him to expend supply on the unfavourable ratios required for counterattacks – I will also compel him to redistribute both supply and combat power from his concentrations against the AH lines to the north. The 10th Army manages to make a small attack against depleted Russian 1st Army divs SE of Riga. His 1st Army is very low in supplies. Further south on the open steppes, a combined force of AH 2nd and 4th armies and the German Sud Armee, with artillery support, makes another attack on the Russian 3rd Army. It is a strong force but a weak defensive position with no trenches and in open ground and I am able to muster 50SP in the attack. A good result will likely force a retreat to minimise losses. A bad result could hurt me badly.*
- *Balkans: The French Mar Bde is now virtually eliminated and is forced to seek support from Serbian forces. It allows the Bulgarians to turn his flank somewhat.*
- *West: My last attack had a better outcome for once with the French compelled to make a tactical withdrawal. I had been tempted to follow up, but pushing German forces out of the security of their entrenchments and into a narrow salient which could be attacked from multiple directions and with significant enemy arty on hand compelled the Germans to exercise discipline. These battles are about attrition, not territory. I make another strong attack SW of Verdun.*
- *Caucasus: The Turks withstood two dangerous attacks last turn which could have very discomfiting outcomes. As things turned out, the loss ratio was 1:4 in my favour for no breakthroughs, which should blunt his ardour a little. Unnecessary Russian losses in minor theatres are something Robert will wish to avoid or he risks bringing economic collapse perilously close.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: I start to build the Jerusalem line.*
- *Italy: Quiet – until next month?*

AP: *This is another turn which is bad for me and should be a reminder that the favourable developments of the last two months are only temporary. I could be heading for a frustrating summer.*

I am completely stuck in the Near East and unlikely to achieve anything until the summer is over thanks to logistical problems in Sinai and Mesopotamia and due to Russian weakness in the Caucasus.

Similarly although I am about to re-supply in the Balkans, I cannot see how any further Allied offensive will put much pressure on the CP. Recent success was mainly a result of voluntary CP retreats.

The Austrians have likely now dodged the Rule 22 pressure to conduct a Strafexpedition Offensive against Italy. The next Italian offensive may be a bloody disaster.

I think I may have messed up the preparation for the Russian offensive. My move in Volhynia was possibly premature and the Russians are getting the worst of the combat results. I thought about initiating an attack but I cannot spare the supply from the stock I need to do a full scale Brusilov style offensive. The situation is not all bad. The Austrians are being sucked into a battle which is always good for the Entente and the Germans are likely going to regret the lack of engineers on this front as I have done a lot of damage to railways in my recent advances.

On the Western Front, the Germans are starting to put noticeable pressure on the French. I have some conflicting goals in my plans and the forthcoming Allied offensive may not be in quite the form I originally intended.