

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT149: 6 – 9 May 1916 (May 2)

General Situation

Gas was a terrible weapon. To turn the very air into a killer was surely the supreme barbarism. Yet neither side could ignore the possibility that the other would have recourse to poisoned gas in an effort to break the deadlock on the Western Front. By necessity efforts to develop suitable gas weapons had to be done in strictest secrecy and the belief that the enemy might be doing this forced both sides into the race. Germany had toyed with this idea before. Falkenhayn had refused to use it in 1915. By 1916, German chemists had made more progress, shell and chemical had been put together, and the temptation to risk ignominy for success had returned.

The Western Front

Joffre had lingered in the vicinity of Verdun closely supervising (meddling in) the actions of Pétain and Gouraud who were busy restoring the French 4th Army to full strength. On 7 May, interrogation of a German deserter had brought credible information that the Germans might be planning a gas attack. So far the warring powers had disdained to use such weapons though all kinds of bad smells put troops on alert frequently enough.

This time Gouraud was particularly concerned as he recognised the gas might target the large concentrations of artillery which had been recently deployed on this part of the front. Furthermore, recent French tactics had included abandoning front line positions in order to avoid the worst of German bombardments and to tempt the Germans forward into exposed positions in order to counterattack them more effectively. Gouraud reflected that a repeat of those tactics in circumstances of a gas attack could lead to panic and the loss of artillery in the confusion. Accordingly, on 8 May, he obtained Pétain's permission to withdraw part of the artillery to deeper positions where they would be less at risk. Joffre also endorsed this decision because he disagreed with Gouraud having so much artillery up front in any case.

The Italian Front

The Austro-Hungarian 8th Army was in receipt of intelligence reports dated 6 May which predicted an imminent Italian offensive on the front along the Isonzo. Requests for reinforcements were made but it was difficult to extract units from other parts of the front and the railway communications of the 8th Army sector were not the best. By 9 May, the only additional unit which had arrived was the Polish 151st Division which detrained at the lonely station of Straža (6-4.3416).

The Italian preparations for their first big attack of 1916 were accelerating. Their railways had their own capacity problems but the main line to Udine (6-4.3117) where Cadorna's reserves were accumulating was exploited to its limits in early May. In the first ten days of May, the Italian 2nd and 3rd Armies had been reinforced by nine Infantry Divisions and five artillery regiments with more still on their way. More than half the Italian 4th Army had been sent from the Trentino to Friuli. A great mood of enthusiasm had returned to Italian

organisation which matched that of the early days of the war. Morale was claimed to be very good by Cadorna, and he was not wrong. In contrast the Austrians were supposed to be war weary and Cadorna though a few hard knocks would shake the foundations of the Hapsburg Empire.

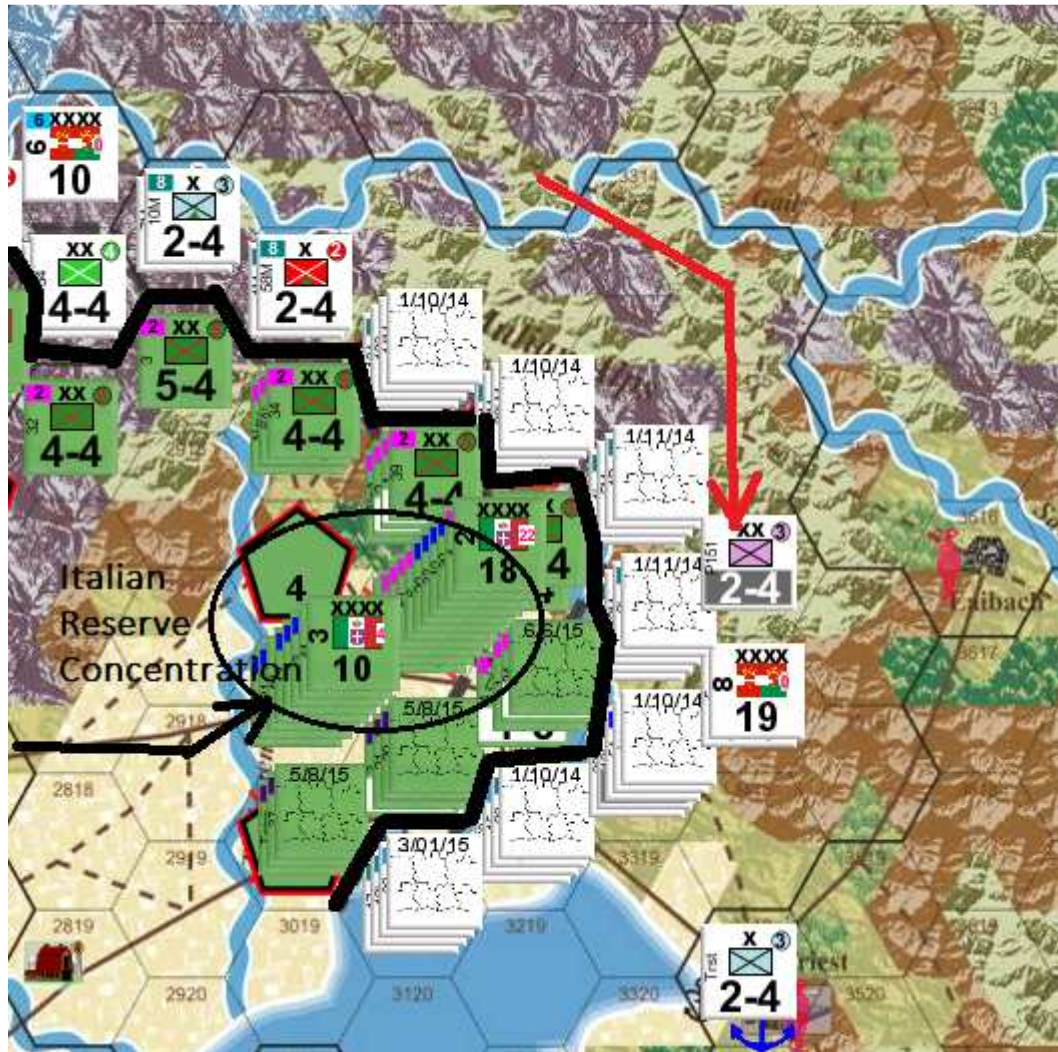


Figure 1: Preparations for the 4th Battle of the Isonzo River, 6 – 9 May 1916.

The Eastern Front

The most significant actions were by both sides focused on the line of the Styr River north of Kivertsi (5-5.4003) following the Austro-Hungarian reverse there in late April. The Russian line on the lower part of the river as it flowed through the Pripet Marshes had not been strongly held at the beginning of May. The German 12th Army had been patrolling to the west and had been threatening to make a more decisive thrust north-east in the direction of the river and even as far north as Pinsk. Such moves might turn the strong Russian positions which had been established in Volhynia and relieve the pressure on the Austrians there.

The Russian 9th Army had been well aware of the danger of being outflanked to the north and had been extending its own flank as far as possible even weakening its principle positions opposite Luck. This was helped by strong units being transferred from the Russian

West Front which were directly sent to man the Styr line and also by the Russian 4th Army, whose headquarters were near Pinsk, closing up and taking responsibility for part of the Styr line.



Figure 2: Styr Sector, 6 - 9 May 1916.

The Balkans

The skirmishing on this front continued as the Central Powers tested the Allied lines at perceived weak points. On 6-7 May, it was the turn of the Austrian 8th Division, supported by Bulgarian allied units (9th Division) to conduct an attack between Ginovtsi and Psacha (7-6.1507). Intelligence had shown that the Allied positions were held by the 1st Shumadia Division which was under strength and also by the French 22nd Division which was perhaps nothing more than a regiment that had kept a major-general who had a staff but had lost all the other elements of his command. Despite this, the Central Powers' attack only proved that their opponents were tough and resilient and had most of the crossings of the Kriva River well covered. If the attack had not been suspended promptly it could have turned into a real disaster for the attackers. It forced the Allies to realise they had left this area too

weakly defended and they swapped in the stronger French 26th Division to secure it more fully in the following days.



Figure 3: Central Powers probe across the Kriva River, 6 - 9 May 1916.

The Near East

The British front in Sinai had reached El Arish (8-8.1736) by the end of the first week in May. The desert in front of the British was completely deserted of other human life. The British Army at Kut was also very isolated from both friends and foes. Never had a battle field been so empty. In the Caucasus, the fronts remained in close proximity but there was no shortage of rocks behind which even substantial positions could be hidden. Near Devadaği (7-8.2015) the Russians had two Brigades camped no more than 5 kilometres from the nearest Turkish units. However, a 3000 metre mountain was between them so their patrols never met.

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Having said previously there is no point penetrating further into Russia and moving away from my railheads, I opt to make just a short forward move back east – no more than 20km – just to deter the Russians moving into any positions of advantage. My armies do not have a continuous front, but they do not need one. The flanks of the armies are sufficiently strong and positioned to prevent any Russian penetration through gaps. If he tries, any such forays will find themselves quickly isolated. The AH front remains static. Given that it is May 1916 and from Apr onwards Robert can roll for*

artillery surprise and the Sad State of the 4th Army, I need to prepare and see whether I can mitigate such an occurrence.

- *Balkans: One small combined attack. It will achieve little, but I want to keep nipping away at his weakest positions to try and prevent him concentrating too much at any point. The terrain favours me on the defence. The Turks form their first 4-4 Div along the Greek border.*
- *West: Reorganization continues and I pull most of the arty out of the trenches to positions where they can be rapidly railed to any locations presenting opportunity. He is concentrating to the rear of Verdun and also behind the Flanders front. I expect a large scale British attack soon.*
- *Caucasus: Quiet – but I have a plan in mind...*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: The Italians have made good use of internal rail LoCs to shift artillery from the siege of Lavarone to the Isonzo front. It is now clear his concentration at Lavarone has been an effective deception plan and that the Italians will attack along the Isonzo. The race is on for AH to likewise shift forces but, given the long route required by rail and the terrain, it is a race I will lose.*

DM Summary – May 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total [%SM]	Morale
Germany	-	-						12	12	1186	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	1						1	2	505	Good
Ottoman	-	-						-	-	72	Good
Bulgaria	-	1						-	1	21	Good
Central Powers	-	2						13	15	1764	
France	-	-						-	-	712	Good
Great Britain	-	-						-	-	252	Good
Russia	-	-						NA	-	759	Shaken
Italy	-	-						-	-	62	Good
Belgium	-	-						NA	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	(1)						NA	(1)	(35)	NA
Entente	-	-						-	-	1777	

AP: I will probably attack next turn on the Italian front. I have managed to redeploy in two turns so I can attack on the third. There has not been much Austrian reaction, I guess because the defence on the Isonzo is reasonably strong and because the turn sequence means I have had two moves against one CP move. However, if I delay the attack an extra turn it will be because there are no reserves concentrating there of any consequence to build up the defence after the attack. It is one of the weaknesses of the Isonzo Front on the Austrian side that it is not served by a double track railway.

The other situation of interest is on the Styr River. If the German 12th Army forces a fight I will accept the challenge. The terrain is favourable and I have the possibility of further reinforcing. My confidence is growing in this region.

I didn't realise the CP had gas until Ivor mentioned it as an aside. I decided I had to pull back some Artillery from the Argonne-Verdun area or take a risk of the Germans overrunning a hex and scoring an additional 24 DM because I had stacked two Artillery Brigades in a couple of hexes (they cannot retreat).