

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT150: 10 – 14 May 1915 (May 3)

General Situation

Acute observers of the war were aware that there was a crisis looming. The potential for unlimited destruction had been apparently contained for months. Among the Allied populations there was an unshakeable assumption that their armies were preparing a killing blow to the Central Powers and it was only a matter of time before all the Furies of modern warfare were unleashed. News that a great Italian offensive had begun on 12 May only underlined the imminence of further action on the Western Front and elsewhere. It was an axiom of saloon-bar strategists across the whole of Europe that when the Allies struck they would do so in unison.

At about the same time as the Italian offensive began it became widely known that the latest German attacks at Verdun had been heralded by the blanketing of the battlefield in a great cloud of poison gas. This raised the stakes immensely. Now the Allied attacks could be seen as justified vengeance on a Germany which had just torn off the restraints of civilised warfare.

The Western Front



Figure 1: The infamous gas attack on Verdun, 10 - 14 May 1916.

Across northern France, 10 May had been a lovely spring day. Near Verdun, the Germans began sporadically shelling around midday but it did not seem that the activity was that unusual until the enemy artillery intensified their bombardment in the mid-afternoon. With everyone sheltering it was

not always quickly appreciated that among the shells were those carrying an unusual cargo. It was gas, mustard gas primarily, and soon it was causing casualties among the defenders. Among the French 9th Division the consequences were particularly severe and, when the unit reported 24 hours later, it declared that fewer than one in six of the infantry were fit for action.

The French had not been completely unprepared for gas attacks as German experiments had been detected and a deserter had recently alerted the French 4th Army to the possibility of such an event. However, it was shocking to confront the reality and the gas cloud greatly impaired the French fighting capabilities during the next few days partly because it persisted in the calm meteorological conditions.

The German 4th Army had put a lot of faith in this new weapon but it was not the only thing they were counting on. No German attack before 10 May had so much supporting firepower. The infantry began to advance late in the day and they overran the French 72th Reserve Division which had also been decimated by the gas. The German intention had been to make initial lodgements on the first day and then push through a broken French defence on 11 May. This didn't happen for two reasons. First, the persistence of the gas became an impediment to the German attack as the follow up Divisions had not been issued with respirators (which were in short supply). Second, the French V Corps held firm along the wooded hills covering the northern approaches to Verdun. German units going up those slopes rarely got to the top and those that did were blasted off again for the French had some well-sited artillery of their own. The German 7th Division claimed to be less than 5 kilometres from Verdun on 12 May but they were forced to hold off French counterattacks that day and the next and after 11 May a break though was never likely. The German commander, Duke Albrecht von Wurttemberg subsequently declared that he resigned on 14 May because he believed that 11 May was the Germans only chance to capture Verdun and deliver a vital blow against French morale before the main Allied offensive started. His successor, Sixt von Arnim, refused to accept that this was so and immediately set the staff of the 4th Army on planning further attacks on their front. He was, however, shocked to learn that the German artillery had used up more than three weeks' worth of German shell production in less than 72 hours and stocks were becoming more depleted than at any time previously that year.

The Italian Front

The 4th Battle of the Isonzo began at dawn on 12 May. It was a bright day and an infectious optimism had spread among the Italian infantry. They could see the reserves massing and the artillery batteries in greater numbers than before. The idea that offensive willpower could still determine the outcome was unchallenged and the experiences of 1915 were forgotten.

The confidence of the men would have been less secure if they had been aware of the bitter demarcation disputes between the Italian 2nd and 3rd Armies which divided responsibility for the attack. Cadorna should have controlled this better but he fostered the rivalry because he thought it would stimulate greater exertions and because he was persuaded that the Austrian front was most vulnerable to an attack on a broad front. Cadorna also kept the left wing Corps (20th and 30th Division) of the 2nd Army out of the initial attacks because he was not satisfied that they would coordinate successfully with 3rd Army operations a few kilometres away.

Despite these self-inflicted difficulties seventeen Italian Divisions were involved in the initial phase of the fighting which lasted for 72 hours. The offensive was concentrated against two main areas of the Austrian line. In neither location was a breakthrough won. The Austro-Hungarian 8th Army managed to slow down the Italian attack and inflicted huge losses on masses of advancing infantry until casualties taught them to be more careful. As previously, the Italians managed to get footholds on the eastern bank of the river but the bridgeheads were all narrow and swept by machine gun fire and shelling so that all movement was suppressed preventing the Italians mustering their survivors and pressing on to more distant objectives.

The Italian 3rd Army had a minor degree of success at Turriaco (6-4.3119) in the bend of the river closest to the sea where they managed to defeat the 12th Honved¹ Brigade which had been in an exposed position and suffered heavy losses from Italian shellfire. A counterattack by the Hungarian 17th and 32nd Divisions managed to restore most of the Hapsburg positions near Turriaco and the Italian successes were very slender.

There was a similar picture of initial failure in the main Italian 2nd Army attacks. These were concentrated around Zagora (6-4.3317) along a straight section of the river running down towards Gorizia. The ground rose steeply on the far side of the river and the existence of a few bridgeheads from previous attacks in no way diminished the difficulty and cost of getting seven Italian Divisions to the opposite side. Units suffered losses just waiting their turn to bridge the stream. There were several massacres as the Italians made repeated efforts to advance up the rough escarpments which concealed many strong enemy positions. After a few days of this there was no trace of the optimism which had motivated the first assaults. The reality of the strength of the Austrian positions drained enthusiasm and promoted caution.

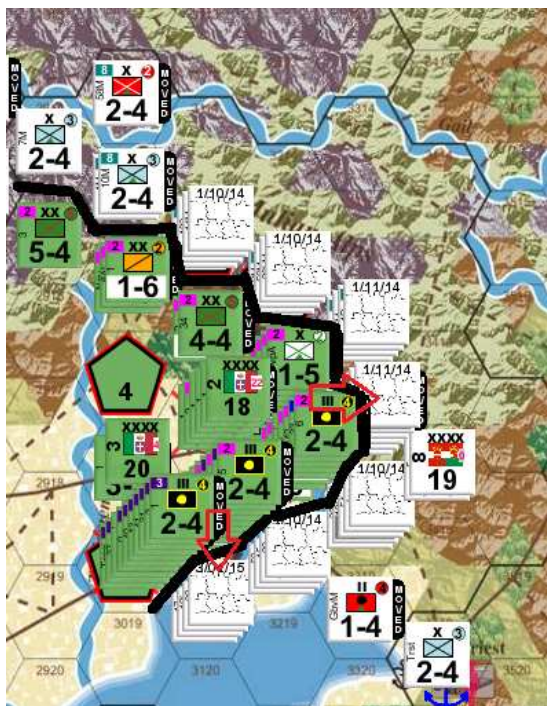


Figure 2: Opening of the 4th Battle of the Isonzo, 12 - 14 May 1916.

¹ Hungarian Landwehr

The Eastern Front

The Germans were now engaged in one of their periodic thrusts forward in Belorussia. The Russians were no more capable of standing against them here than they had proved on every previous occasion since the summer of 1915. The Russian forces fell back towards Vitebsk and Minsk and it looked like the rail junction of Baranovich (4-5E.0219) would change hands again.

On Ludendorff's staff, Hoffmann was the main exponent of these short range stabs at the Russian front. He even advised the German Armies engaged on his recommended V shaped formation which was adapted to reach as far east as possible while refusing both flanks to any attempt of the Russians to strike back on the sides of the spearheads.

There were significant limitations to these actions nevertheless. The Germans had not been able to keep the railway net repaired much further east than Kovno, Bialystok and Brest-Litovsk. They could not stay supplied more than 200 kilometres east of this and for this reason even Minsk was out of reach. Also impossible would be any grand strategic move behind the Pripet Marshes into the rear of the Russian forces in Volhynia and western Ukraine. The Russians were difficult to pin down also. Sometimes there was a skirmish such as one at Karelchy (4.5E.0316) on 12 May but the Russians rarely allowed themselves to be drawn into a pitched battle.

Further south both the Russians and Austro-Hungarians were still reinforcing the critical Volhynian Front as fast as they could. Along the Styr River north of Luck there was a standoff and the German 12th Army did not make the attack which had been threatened in previous days. This was no doubt a result of prudence as regards the difficulties of a river crossing. In the swampy terrain, getting the troops into positions to launch attacks was difficult enough.

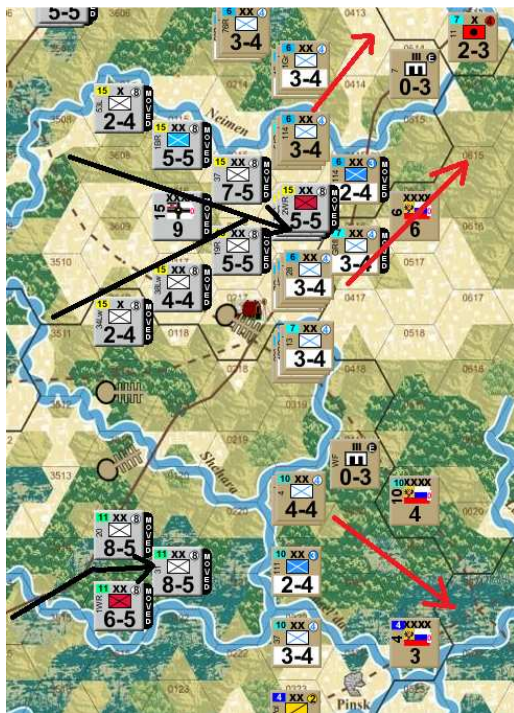


Figure 3: German advances in Belorussia, the German 15th and 11th Armies employing Hoffmann's V formation, 10 - 14 May 1916.

The Balkans

There was little action on the South Balkan front. An Allied Commission was in the region conducting a survey of Greek ports. Italian engineers were despatched to Durrës in Albania in order to establish if the port could be put to Allied use. They advised that it could be back in action within a fortnight.

In Athens there was a scandal which forced the resignation of the Finance Minister and the Minister of Mines. By this time, the exigencies of the blockade had forced the Greek government to sell stocks of chromium, mercury and lead to the Entente powers. However, in a double accounting fraud, the Greek books were also showing secret exports to the Central Powers. There had actually been no such exports since late 1915, not least because German demand had been satiated, but some gullible investors had not known that allowing the two ministers to finance foreign property purchases for their own benefit plus all the other perquisites of scandalously corrupt lifestyles. Since the dupes had been persuaded they were acting in the national interest, this episode did great harm to what remained of royalist and pro-Central Powers sympathy in Greece.

The Near East

This was the period in which the Westerners were most dominant in the senior ranks of the British military hierarchy. With everything depending on the campaign under preparation in France, the two expeditionary forces in the Near East looked unable to achieve anything of value and a further repeat of the defeats at Gallipoli and Baghdad did not seem unlikely. This was in reality deceptive. Murray and Maude needed time to overcome their logistical hurdles and Murray insisted he would move faster once he cleared the desert barrier. On 14 May, his advance guard was only 40 kilometres from Gaza and that was understood to be undefended.

There was a renewal of fighting on the Pontic coast on 10 May. Four Turkish Infantry Divisions struck at the positions of the Russian I Caucasian Corps near the coastal town of Merkez (6-8.1315). The Russians had thinned their defences there and the Turkish attacks were designed to wear out the defending Russians who had good positions in the coastal hills but a shortage of men to hold them. The Turks kept up their probes for three days and so the Russians were obliged to send the 2nd Brigade of the 66th Division to reinforce their coastal flank on 13 May.



Figure 4: Turkish attacks east of Trabzon, 10 - 12 May 1916.

DM Summary – May 1916

| Nation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Food Deficit | Month | Total | Morale |
|-----------------|---|-----|----|---|---|---|---|--------------|-------|-------|--------|
| Germany | - | - | 7 | | | | | 12 | 19 | 1193 | Good |
| Austria-Hungary | - | 1 | 4 | | | | | 1 | 6 | 509 | Good |
| Ottoman | - | - | 1 | | | | | - | - | 73 | Good |
| Bulgaria | - | 1 | - | | | | | - | 1 | 21 | Good |
| Central Powers | - | 2 | 12 | | | | | 13 | 26 | 1796 | |
| France | - | - | 10 | | | | | - | 10 | 722 | Good |
| Great Britain | - | - | - | | | | | - | - | 252 | Good |
| Russia | - | - | 2 | | | | | NA | 2 | 761 | Shaken |
| Italy | - | - | 11 | | | | | - | 11 | 73 | Good |
| Belgium | - | - | - | | | | | NA | - | (105) | NA |
| Serbia | - | (1) | - | | | | | NA | (1) | (35) | NA |
| Entente | - | - | 23 | | | | | - | 23 | 1808 | |

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: More probing and jostling for advantageous position along the entire front. There is a small opportunity for a German attack against Russians in open ground which I take. Otherwise, not much happens here this turn.*
- *Balkans: Just a bit of reorganisation in the centre of the line. There is a bit of a Mexican stand-off here at the moment.*
- *West: A very big turn for the Germans this time. I spend a lot of time juggling forces to amass the greatest possible concentration against Verdun. I have also spent the last few turns gradually concentrating artillery to the rear of the lines of departure for the Verdun attack. Bizarrely, Robert has left Verdun relatively weakly defended but with a single artillery division in situ. I throw a 174SP attack at Verdun from three separate hexes (Yes, I know I could have massed a little more but there is still a front line to defend and I suspect this attack will galvanise the British into activity). My gas roll (DR 7) nets me an extra +2 drm on the attack and -2 drm for Robert's counterattack, so I am quietly optimistic. Having said that, my WF outcomes have been very poor rolls so watch for the 1/6 split! If I get a good result – bearing in mind I write my feedback after making my moves and before sending the logfile to Robert to resolve the rolls for combat – he will either have to take heavy losses in place or retreat and lose the artillery. I'm pretty sure he will soak up any losses with infantry; but if not, then I will advance 6 x divs into the Verdun hex. Fingers crossed on this, which cost me 54 supply.*
- *Caucasus: I am in a position to launch an attack along the coast to hopefully throw the Russians back towards the border.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*

- *Italy: I am racing to reinforce the Isonzo front. I expect an attack here this turn, however. It would be foolish for Robert to delay as his intelligence will have ensured he is aware of my desperate troop movements away from the Alps and towards the east.*

AP: I certainly dodged a bullet this turn. The German attack on Verdun had combat strength 174 and with a gas advantage the die roll modifier was only -2. With a 1d6 result of 5+ that would have swept my defenders out of Verdun and I would have lost an Artillery Brigade too. I could have lost 31 DM in a single combat but with a die split of 1/1 the losses were 10 French to 6 German. Ordinarily that would be a good result for Germany but given the resources committed to that attack it will be a significant disappointment which is alleviated only by the weak counterattack which also had a -1 drm after the effects of gas were applied.

Nevertheless now we have seen the potential for gas, both sides will be hoping for some more. Also despite the result, this last attack was possibly the most powerful yet in the game regardless of the gas. I fear the repeat of such attacks and assume the Germans will eventually be able to land a blow with a better die or will find a better locale.

My major initiative is the Italian attacks. The weak point in the defence is the hex at the mouth of the river. The Austrians are not able to fully supply that hex at the moment. I have to respect the broad front rules affecting Italian attacks in this sector which means the Italian 3rd Army is restricted to attacking from 1.5 hexes but that is actually not the most disadvantageous position this Army could be in. The loss ratio in my two attacks was 4:11 in the Austrians favour. My dice were barely better than the German one at Verdun so it is not such a bad turn for the CP overall. In comparison there is a lot less committed to the Italian attacks (in total about 70 SP and 20 supply points), so I lose less if I roll a one or a two.

I checked my sustainment pipelines this turn. I have had significant spare capacity since abandoning the Gallipoli bridgehead. I have increased now the capacity for several fronts. The British Army in France is currently 46.5 Division equivalents so I have now made allowance to expand that to 64 which may never happen. I now have 9 Division equivalents in Egypt.

| Pipeline | Distance | Capacity | Shipping Points |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
| North Africa – France | 5 hexes | 2 Divisions | 2 |
| Morocco - France | 13 hexes | 2 Divisions | 4 |
| Albania - Italy | 2 hexes | 2 Divisions | 1 |
| France – UK | 2 – 3 hexes | 64 Divisions | 32 |
| Egypt – UK (SW ports) | 44 hexes | 16 Divisions | 80 |
| Salonika (plus Mudros) – France | 18 hexes | 10 Divisions | 20 |
| Salonika - UK | 43 hexes | 4 Divisions | 20 |
| Basra – India | 40 hexes | 10 Divisions | 40 |
| Basra – UK | 91 hexes | 2 Division | 20 |
| Total (Reserve) | | | 219 (31) |