

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT151: 15 – 18 May 1916 (May 4)

General Situation

The shock of the gas cloud at Verdun wore off after a few days but it provided the excuse for every politician in the Allied camp to call for vengeance. Even the urbane Prime Minister Asquith allowed himself to be quoted as declaring that “the gloves would come off” henceforth. The Germans were equally shrill in the diplomatic shouting match excusing the use of gas. What, the German Chancellor asked, was the difference between the Allied blockade and the use of gas? Starving some soldiers of oxygen was surely far less of an offense than starving a whole Continent by means of a blockade.

Whatever the merits of the argument about the gas outrage, the focus of the action on the Western Front did not seem likely to stay at Verdun. In mid-May, the Germans had suspended their attacks there and were everywhere going on alert for an anticipated Allied attack in the West.

The Western Front



Figure 1: French Cavalry screening preparations for the French Offensive in Champagne, 17 - 18 March 1916

On 17 May, Ernst Junger was at an observation post of the 8th Ersatz Division near Laffaux (5-3.1314). As he had recently stated in his journal, he was frustrated to have seen no action to speak of for several months. That morning, however, there was a sudden shout from a sentry and he was called to witness a movement close to the horizon. After trying to work the focus of his binoculars for several minutes, Junger managed to get enough definition to confirm riders moving into the village of Margival (5-3.1214) about 2 kilometres away. The German scouts kept undercover for the rest of the day before withdrawing that night. By then Junger had seen enough to report that the French had moved forward from Soissons and their cavalry was filling the country in front of the German

outposts. No similar activity had been seen since the French had reoccupied Soissons at the end of the previous year.

Junger's report and many others had convinced Falkenhayn's staff that a big Allied offensive was imminent. This supported many other intelligence sources which pointed to a major enemy effort in the late spring. Even before the French cavalry started to move, German reserves were moving into position to support the German line on the Aisne and other sectors of the front deemed vulnerable to an enemy attack.

These assessments were all correct. The French had three Armies (10th, 7th and 9th) all preparing to march. Joffre had ordered three Cavalry Divisions out front to screen the preparations from any German interference. In all three Armies, the men were concentrating in camps between the Oise and the Marne and they were told to abandon the trenches in which they had spent so many months. The war of movement might now return and this was every Frenchman's earnest wish. Rumours abounded in the French Armies and it was common speculation that there would at last be an effort to liberate Reims and then break the German defences in the West though one great culminating attack.

The Italian Front

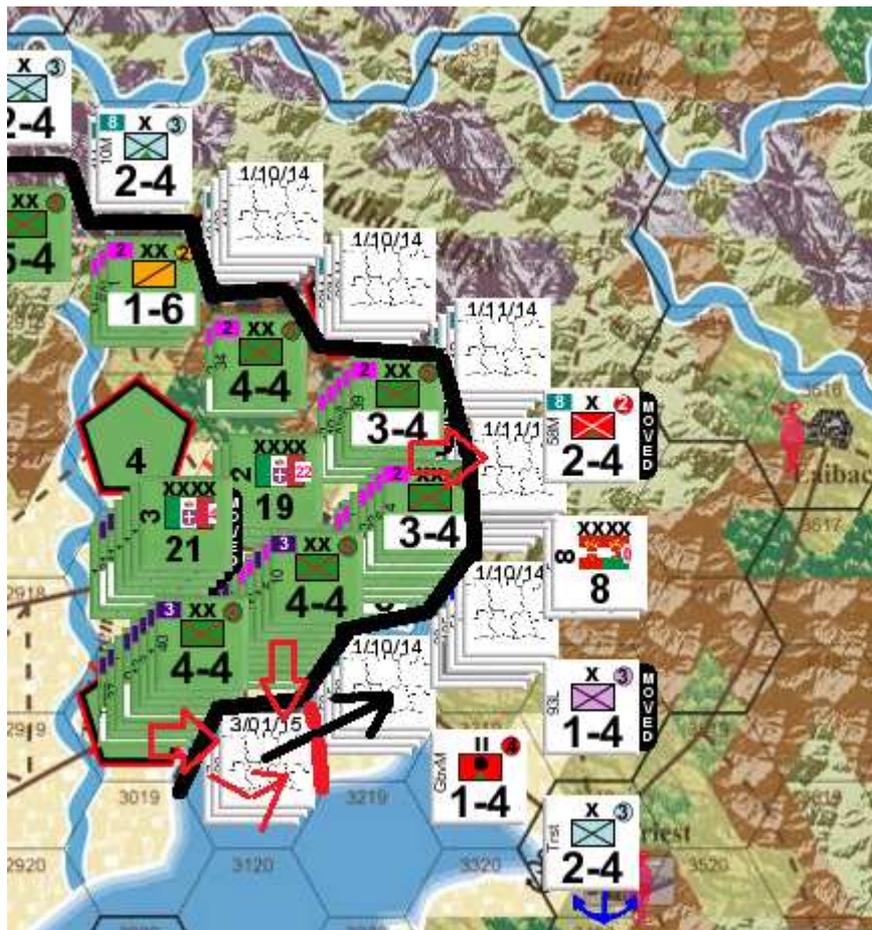


Figure 2: Cadorna persisted and the 4th Isonzo Offensive continues, 15 - 18 May 1916.

The 4th Battle of the Isonzo burst into new activity as every few hours a fresh unit was sent into action. Some of the units were not so fresh. When the commander of the Italian 2nd Army, Frugoni,

asked Cadorna to allow more time for replacements to reach the front he refused and insisted that a unit could attack with only a fraction of its regulation strength. The result of this was another bloody struggle in the hills above Zogora (6-4.3317) in which most regiments of the Italian 1st and 22nd Divisions lost up to 75% of their infantry. Where there were gaps in the ranks of the infantry, the heavy artillery of the Italian Army played an increasing role.

The ferocity of the Italian attacks could not drive the Austro-Hungarians out of their strongest positions in the hills but the enemy 8th Army was using up its own stock of munitions at an unsustainable rate. The situation was most difficult for the Hungarian Divisions trying to stop the Italian 3rd Army expand their bridgeheads on the lower course of the river. By 17 May, the defenders were reporting severe ammunition shortages and the Italian attacks began again in considerable strength. The following day, the Italians were threatening to move down the road from Sagrado to Ronchi dei Legionari (6-4.3119). At this, the Hungarian 17th Division began falling back towards Monfalcone (6-4.3218) and this confirmed the first significant Italian breakthrough on the Isonzo front since the first days of the war.

The Eastern Front

The situation on the Eastern Front remained mostly static. The German 12th Army was nevertheless still extending its front in the Pripet Marshes and had its 25th Division less than 35 kilometres from Pinsk. The Russians were active strengthening their line on the Styr River and constructing trenches in Volhynia.

The Balkans

The war in the Balkans was often conducted very slowly. Sarrail was accused of insensitivity and a lack of diplomacy when he let it be known that he thought the average Serbian soldier was “lazy” when it came to entrenching.¹ However, there was some evidence of this even from Serbian sources. On 18 May, the commander of the Serbian 3rd Corps severely reprimanded the commander of the 1st Moravan Division, who was also serving as military governor of Skopje. The cause was that more than a month after liberation of the city the entrenchments covering the Skopje were still not completed.

The Near East

The fighting on the Black Sea coast at Merkez (6-8.1315) resumed on 15 May and was very fierce for several days as four Turkish Divisions slowly ground down the Second Brigade of the Russian 66th Division which had been left to defend the town. The resistance was heroic and the Turks suffered terrible casualties in bold frontal attacks which were near suicidal. The Russian defenders were also helped by units of the 143rd Division which tried to keep open a road to the small town. By 18 May, the Russian counterattacks had ceased and the survivors of Merkez got out if they could, some by small rowing boats found in the harbour. By the end of the day, the whole Russian front on the Pontic coast was in retreat and next morning Turkish patrols would find their way into Merkez without further resistance.

At about the same time as the Battle for Merkez, the station at Am Qamshli in Eastern Syria witnessed the arrival of two trains carrying the main elements of the Pasha 1 German combat group.

¹ It was unfair too. Only one of the French Divisions serving on this front had entrenched its front at this time.

These were specialists in artillery and machine guns on their way to Baghdad (as they understood it) in order to support the Turkish 6th Army. Although the combat group was small, their presence in the Near East represented the fulfilment of the strategic aims of the Berlin to Baghdad Railway.

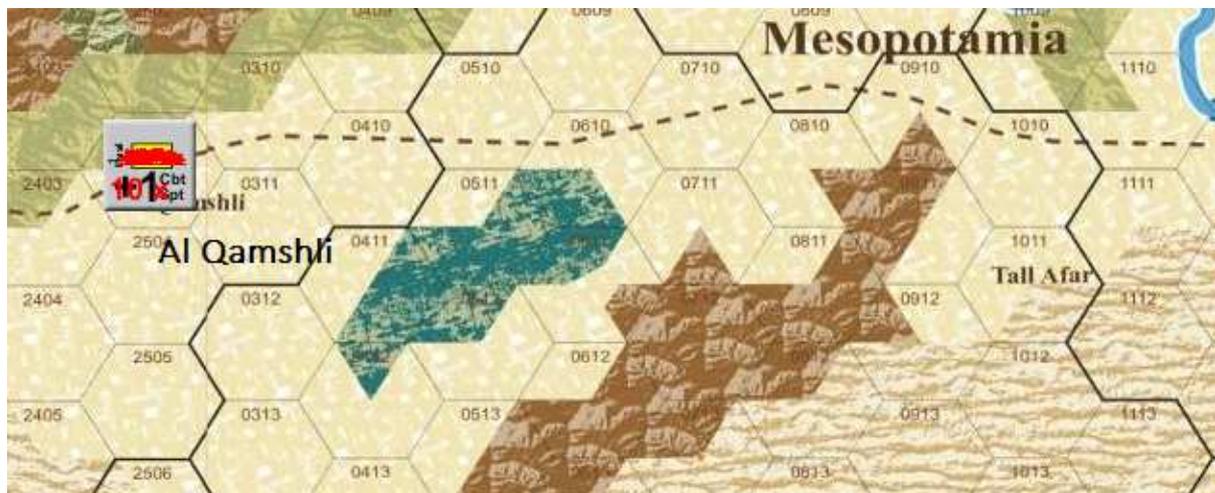


Figure 3: The Pasha 1 Combat Group at Al Qamshli, 17 - 18 May 1916.

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	4				1	10	513	Good
Ottoman	-	-	1	3				-	4	76	Good
Bulgaria	-	1	-	-				-	1	21	Good
Central Powers	-	2	12	7				13	34	1803	
France	-	-	10	-				-	10	722	Good
Great Britain	-	-	-	-				-	-	252	Good
Russia	-	-	2	1				NA	3	762	Shaken
Italy	-	-	11	8				-	19	81	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-				NA	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	(1)	-	-				NA	(1)	(35)	NA
Entente	-	-	23	9				-	32	1817	

Player Notes

CP:

- East: Very quiet. The Russians are out of reach for the Germans and the AH armies are engaged in static trench warfare.
- Balkans: Quiet.
- West: My attack at Verdun was pretty much another blowout – even with gas. I managed a 10:6 ratio of casualties which, when all is said and done, is actually a loss for me given

what I spent and the overall results thus far on the WF. Pretty much every attack I have made on this front has been to my disadvantage. I cannot afford to continue on with these consistently negative outcomes. I know my strategy on the WF has been queried by some on CSW; however, just about every CP attack since 1915, in the west, has been abysmal. The outcomes have been akin to Italy's achievements on the Isonzo Front in the real war!

- *Caucasus: I launch another attack along the coast to hopefully throw the Russians back towards the border.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Two attacks were launched along the Isonzo which resulted in an overall split of losses of 11:4 in my favour. Hardly a dent for the Italians, but I am pleased nonetheless.*

AP: It will not be long now before I attack on the Western Front. I have been quite self-disciplined and the timing and shape of the attack should be as I have planned it for some time. The German attacks around Verdun-Argonne have not changed things that much as they were not as extreme as a full blown attack on the French which might have precluded further French offensive activity. What has happened will allow a bit but not too much and I will want to lean on the British predominantly.

I am sympathetic to Ivor's complaint about poor luck in his attacks though the last one at Verdun could have been worse if I had a higher die.

I am pleased with the offensive on the Italian Front so far even though I suffered a loss ratio of 8:4 against me this turn (it was still better than last time). It has a number of features which I think are relevant to successful DWK offensives:

- Swift concentration to give the defender limited opportunity to reinforce (if not possible some other masking of intentions might be attempted).*
- Attacks should be as strong as possible. In this case, I am forced to divide my attacks into two because of the "broad front" rules on the Italian front. However, last turn my goal was to attack each time with 34 combat strength points because that is the lowest combat strength on which a 3 hit result can be achieved with a modified roll of 0. I failed to get that, but was guaranteed 2 hits. My attacks this turn were achieving 29 combat strength points which give a 3 hit result on a modified 1 roll. To get to these combat strengths I had to increase the amount of artillery firing to compensate for losses last time. These combat strengths should be compared to the fact that the absolute maximum infantry attack the 2nd Army could make would have been 48 combat strength (the 3rd Army maximum is 36 because it effectively attacking from 1.5 hexes). Therefore these are not optimum attacks but about the best I can do given the defensive demands of the rest of the front and the low Italian replacement rate.*
- Indifference to casualties. This is only sometimes possible, but the difference in morale between Italy and Austria allows me to be relaxed about suffering disproportionate losses. If I was more concerned about casualties, I would not be attacking this part of the front but instead a more weakly defended part of the mountain front. However, the Isonzo is where I can inflict losses on the Austrians fastest and that is my priority.*
- Persistence. It would not help to stop this attack once started as it would slow the rate at which I inflict casualties (especially if I chose a mountain attack). Furthermore, the aim of*

the attack is to inflict losses faster than they can be replaced and so as to deplete the defenders' supply. So long as the situation of the defence is not improving too much or not at all it makes sense to keep attacking at the same place.

- v) *Use up my own resources. I am happy to attack to the point of exhaustion of men and supplies. The Italians are doing their utmost to get the Austrians as close as possible to Shaken Morale. I will not mind if afterwards I am short of men and supplies for months because I should be able to survive any purely Austrian counter offensive (which is not now likely) and defensive fighting will suit me anyway.*

It was, I believe, a correct move for the Austrians to give up Ronchi (6-4.3119). The problem of the Italian 3rd Army is that the rules require it to effectively attack one hex every time the 2nd Army attacks on this front. It is more important that this hex has a very strong defence than that it has a high defensive drm. Short lines, well stacked, are the Austrians' best aid.