

## Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT152: 19 – 22 May 1916 (May 5)

### General Situation

Not a few historians have claimed that 21 May 1916 was one of the critical turning points of the First World War. Until then the initiative had truly been with the Central Powers and the invasions of Belgium, France, Serbia and Russian Poland had all been proof of this. The Allies had begun to hit back in 1916, first with the attempt to capture Baghdad. Subsequently, the Sarrail-Misič Offensive in the Balkans and the 4<sup>th</sup> Isonzo Offensive had confirmed the trend. However, the failure of the German attacks at Verdun, the French advance to the Aisne and the British attacks on the Somme really demonstrated the turn of fortune on the most critical front. The Germans still had a very solid front in the West but the British and French were showing that it would not remain unchallenged.

### The Western Front



Figure 1: The French advance to the Aisne and the recovery of Reims, 20 - 22 May 1916.

Ernst Junger's journal entry for 21 May 1916 records:

*"I was back on the Aisne escarpment with the rest of the regiment. We were on alert. Everyone stood at arms. This order applied to the whole 2<sup>nd</sup> Army. The French were coming we all knew it. I was thrilled to be able to have such a grandstand position from which to observe what would be the greatest battle of all time. What is more, we knew that this was only part of it. Throughout the day we could hear the muffled sounds of a distant barrage carried by the wind. The British were attacking further west and this had to be the decisive battle we were all hoping for.*

*As the day wore on more and more French were spotted. I was supposed to make some kind of assessment of their strength and climbed to a treehouse we had built in order to get the widest possible view. By mid-afternoon, the distant roads towards the river were filled with enemy columns, infantry of all types, and cavalry too. The fields and villages were overflowing with French all out in the open in dense formations. It almost seemed like a scene from Napoleon's day and if I had spotted the bearskins of the Imperial Guard I would not have been surprised. In the end, I completed my report on the numbers of the enemy saying they were uncountable. One odd thing about today was that there was no firing at all anywhere close to me. We were too busy taking in the spectacle to think about using our weapons.*

The French advance was on a very broad front stretching from Noyon to Suippes (5-3.1615), east of Reims. Reims itself was taken back by the French on 21 May as the French X Corps filed silently through its ancient streets. A thanksgiving service for liberation was given at the cathedral next day with Foch and Joffre both attending. German resistance was very slight to the whole French movement but by the evening of 22 May the advance was over and the opposing pickets of both sides were sniping at each other as the new front line had defined itself. Along a significant part of this front the Germans stood on the far side of the River Aisne entrenched on the steep slopes rising above the northern bank of the river.



Figure 2: The start of the Somme Offensive, showing the 4th Army manoeuvre, 20 - 22 May 1916.

The only part of the French Army which had been significantly engaged was the heavy guns of the French 5<sup>th</sup> Army which had opened up on the German lines covering Peronne (part of the German 13<sup>th</sup> Army). This bombardment was to provide some flank support for the British Offensive which

had commenced soon after dawn on 21 May 1916. It was probably these guns that Ernst Junger heard that day.

The British plan was focussed on an attack by their 4<sup>th</sup> Army at the southern end of the British line. In fact, the attack itself extended the British line down to the Somme River and although it was not known as such for quite a long time, history has dubbed this the Somme Offensive. Haig had required Rawlinson commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Army to strike the heaviest possible blow against the Germans. Rawlinson had considered his Army was too small and had too narrow a frontage to use its strength effectively. The result of this was an arrangement with the French by which they would give up a 20 kilometre sector east of Albert allowing the British to attack through their lines just as they were being thinned to nothing. This meant that part of the British attacking force would have a significant march before attacking and neither the infantry nor the artillery would have much time to familiarise themselves with the front. Furthermore, the IX Corps which Rawlinson used on the second day of the offensive consisted of relatively raw divisions which had not been in action before.

The British offensive was not only on the 4<sup>th</sup> Army front. On 21 May, there was a very heavy bombardment by British batteries against the German positions around Lens. The British targeted the enemy artillery and for two days a stupendous duel was fought out at long range as both sides engaged in counter battery operations. The British had more heavy guns involved and therefore gained some advantage over the German artillery which had never been put under such a lethal threat before. Nevertheless, both sides lost a lot of guns and the infantry kept their heads down amid the terrible sounds of shells passing in both directions.

Books have been written about the tremendous fighting in the chalk country north of the Somme after the British “went over the top” on 21 May. The British 4<sup>th</sup> Army was opposed by three regular German Divisions (17<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup>) with a reserve Division (52<sup>nd</sup> Reserve) in reserve. The German trenches were of high quality and well protected by wire. Three British artillery brigades had supported the attack, but once the barrage lifted the infantry were on their own and German machine guns did terrible execution on the advancing infantry. However, nobody has ever suggested the results were a disaster and it has always been recognised that German losses were commensurate with the sacrifices made to get the surviving British infantry into the German trench system. Naturally close hand-to-hand fighting is deadly for those who enter the melee but Haig and Rawlinson were fortunate that public opinion has always adopted a very realistic understanding of why such awful things might be necessary.

The result was still unclear after two days of repeated attacks on the German front. The British had advanced barely half a kilometre at best and 16,000 casualties had already been reported to Haig. Nevertheless, he was not disheartened and he urged Rawlinson to keep up the attacks in the hope they could break through to Bapaume (5-3.1010).

### **The Italian Front**

The fighting on the Isonzo now halted though it was not immediately clear whether this would be a short pause or a longer break between major efforts. The Italians consolidated their gains across the Lower Isonzo. However, the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was already in contact with strong Austro-Hungarian positions covering Monfalcone (6-4.3218) on 19 May and there was no way that they could be assaulted without careful reconnaissance and planning which could not be done in a hurry.



The two sides therefore gained a breather. The Italians needed to replace their heavy infantry losses and the Austro-Hungarian 8<sup>th</sup> Army was anxious to restock on ammunition. With a Russian offensive looming on the Eastern Front, it was not so easy for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army to gain the priority it thought it deserved.

### The Eastern Front

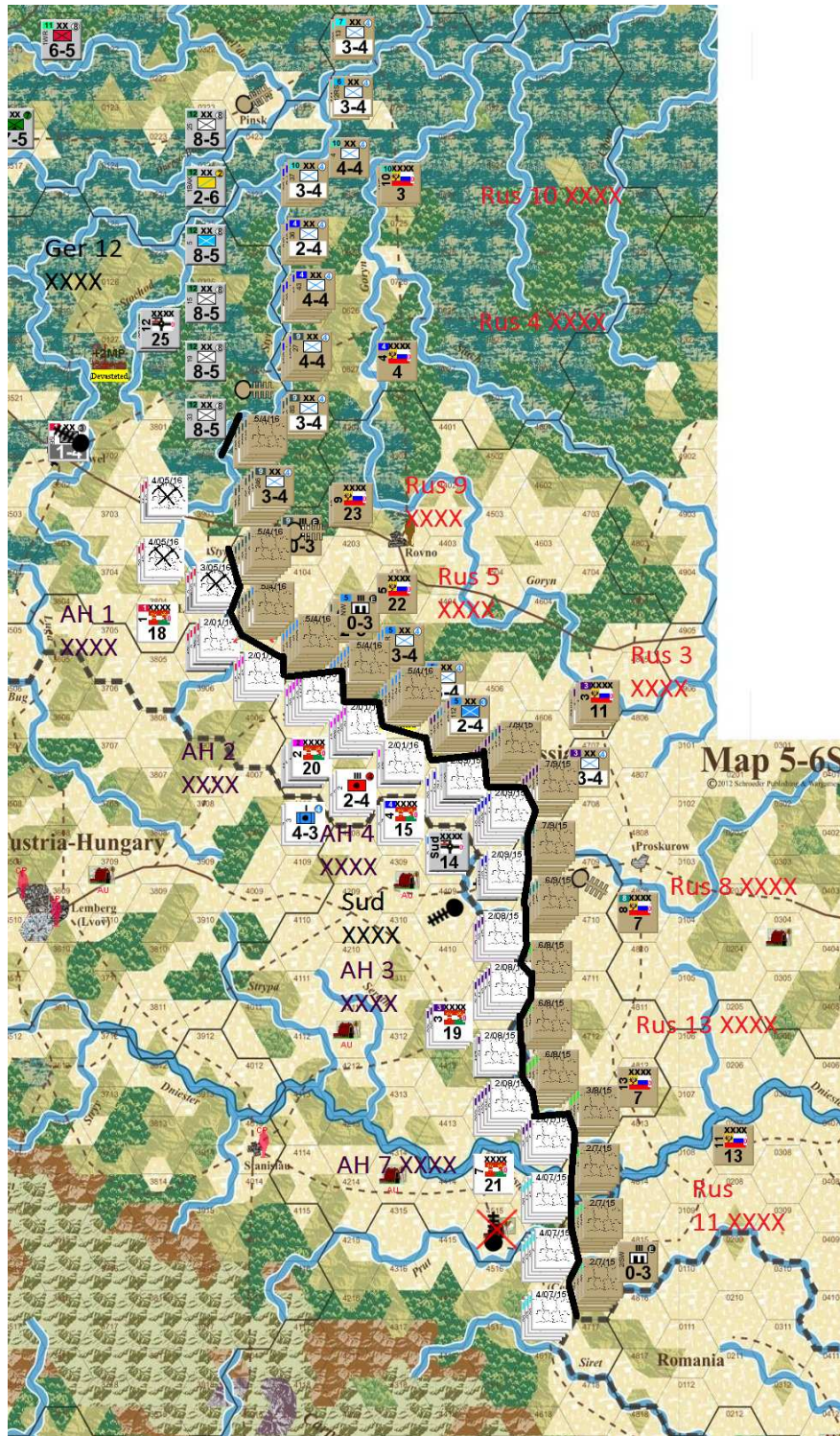


Figure 3: The Fronts in the Pripet Marshes and Western Ukraine, 19 - 22 May 1916.

There remained little overt offensive activity on the whole Eastern Front. The Germans had moved east again during this month but the Russians continued to screen Dauguvpils, Vitebsk and Minsk and there seemed little prospect that the Germans could make any kind of move on them.

The Tsar was in receipt of reports from General Brusilov who had completed an inspection of the South West Front in mid-May. Brusilov admitted that many units were still below strength but nevertheless the build-up on the Styr and Volhynian sectors had been impressive. The enemy had also been more passive lately and it was deemed by Brusilov that they were pinned to a long front that might be awkward to defend. Brusilov advised the Tsar that the South West Front would now begin intensive planning for an attack but efforts to increase the stockpiling of supply for such an offensive had to be redoubled.

### The Balkans

The commencement of the Allied Offensive in the West saw a flurry of diplomatic activity as the Central Powers sought to persuade the remaining neutral powers that this was the last throw of the dice by the Allies. Once the battle had demonstrated the immovable resolve of the German Armies, there would no doubt be an attempt at negotiated peace. Germany practically promised Odessa to Romania and Macedonia to be partitioned between Greece and Bulgaria.

### The Near East



Figure 4: The Turkish advance along the Black Sea coast, 19 - 22 May 1916.

The Russian retreat on the Pontic Coast had stopped a days' march west of Rize. The Russians had shortened their front and the Turkish pursuit found their opponents in good positions on 20 May located in the steep hills that ran up from the coast. Attacks on this line would have to be more carefully planned and both sides settled into a co-existence made more pleasant by the gentle climate of the region.

Nothing of consequence was heard of action in Iraq or Sinai. In Iraq, the rivers were still running high and the sun was decidedly hot during the lengthening days.

**DM Summary – May 1916**

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
<b>Germany</b>	-	-	7	-	19			12	38	1212	Good
<b>Austria-Hungary</b>	-	1	4	4	-			1	4	513	Good
<b>Ottoman</b>	-	-	1	3	-			-	-	76	Good
<b>Bulgaria</b>	-	1	-	-	-			-	1	21	Good
<b>Central Powers</b>	-	2	12	7	19			13	53	1807	
<b>France</b>	-	-	10	-	*-			-	10	722	Good – *Reims re-captured
<b>Great Britain</b>	-	-	-	-	20			-	20	272	Good
<b>Russia</b>	-	-	2	1	-			NA	3	762	Shaken
<b>Italy</b>	-	-	11	8	-			-	19	81	Good
<b>Belgium</b>	-	-	-	-	-			NA	-	(105)	NA
<b>Serbia</b>	-	(1)	-	-	-			NA	(1)	(35)	NA
<b>Entente</b>	-	-	23	9	20			-	52	1829	

Player Notes:

CP:

- *East: I have nothing of significance to report. From my side, there is nothing much to be done but posture and assess where my weakest points of the AH front are. I fully expect a Brusilov-style offensive along this front in June.*
- *Balkans: Quiet.*
- *West: I have been thinning the troop concentrations I had around Verdun. My efforts there I deem a failure. I launched several very large scale attacks along this front over a period of 3 months and just about everyone I came out of worsted. I could keep attacking by playing the maths of which we are all aware (but would not be in reality) which is a balance of DMs. So, I could keep trying to batter at the French in the hopes they lose the race to shaken morale and then economic collapse (as also balanced against my monthly DM losses to hunger). However, I would bleed out the German army in the process and thus make myself extremely vulnerable to the inevitable British offensive and, by necessity, weaker on the EF too; possibly even enabling a breakthrough for the British. I have to consider long term war aims at this stage; that is to say, not to suffer a military defeat as opposed to fooling myself that I could achieve some sort of spectacular military success on the decisive WF. Such an approach would more likely see a CP capitulation in early 1917! This may sound unimaginative and defeatist, but I think it is realistic.*



- *Caucasus: My attack was not very glorious; I took 3:1 losses. He opted for a tactical withdrawal, but my offensive capacity on this front is now significantly set back.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet; although some German combat support is en route.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: I continue to scabble together forces to defend along the Isonzo – brigade by brigade. I also chose to relinquish a bridgehead along the coast on my side of the Isonzo. This may seem unwise, but I think necessary to shorten my lines and bring all my trench positions into supply.*

*AP: The Allied Offensive has begun. These are the first attacks I have made in the West since November 1915. In the intervening period I have been accumulating supply, reinforcements and replacements. There has also been a significant build-up of Artillery, more than I need for the attack, but the more Artillery units there are the harder it is to spot where the attack will fall and the more flexible I can be to change the axis of attack afterwards.*

*The attacks are also a cover for the French advance to the Aisne. Until now the Germans would probably have enjoyed the chance to pick off the French as they advanced out of their trenches but it would take an iron nerve to do it while fending off the British and with the threat of a Russian offensive looming.*

*The object of this offensive now is to get Germany beyond the submarine trigger as soon as possible. Since it is about 230 DM away before the start of this offensive I probably will not do it in one single push but over a series of attacks over a few months. Taking account of the food deficit it might be possible to get there before September in which case an early US entry may occur. I could do it faster if the French threw themselves into it more fully but I am trying to keep them from Shaken Morale.*

*The attacks themselves are relatively artillery heavy to begin with. There are 83 British Infantry SP attacking and 62 Artillery SP including 14 French Artillery SP. This means that further supplied infantry attacks or counterattacks will be mandated by GCR 22-13 and my Artillery supply will have to drop off but I needed to start with a big bang. Altogether there is 141 combat strength points in the attacks and the counterattacks will muster 97 combat strength at most. Also, one of my attacks is against German Artillery in the front line which I can beat in a gun duel hopefully.*