

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT154: 28 – 31 May 1916 (May 7)

General Situation

Morale was the great imponderable of the First World War. To many, it seemed unbelievable that men, not always with deep military training, could repeatedly participate in hazardous attacks of the types which were becoming commonplace on the Western and Italian fronts. While war-weariness was a growing issue, especially in Russia and Austria-Hungary, that did not prevent soldiers of either power fighting as fiercely or effectively as at any time since the outbreak of hostilities. The mounting losses did, however, cause commanders to become concerned that the fighting spirit might crack at any time and the consequences of that would be parlous.

Archduke Josef-Ferdinand commanding the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army was quite progressive when assessing the impact of combat on his men. He was quite aware that his formation had borne the brunt of the fighting in Volhynia during the winter and now, with signs growing of a Russian offensive, he was anxious to know whether they would be able to stand the strain of a defensive battle. He was instrumental in giving the great Viennese psycho-analyst Sigmund Freud access to Hapsburg Army reports and other evidence of troop morale during the spring. Freud had no real expertise in military matters and this experiment cannot be regarded as a great success. Nevertheless, Freud's diagnosis was preserved in a brief note dispatched to the Austrian Chief-of-Staff, Conrad, who seemingly ignored it. Of the 4th Army, it said:

"...While there are indications that attachment to the father (the Emperor) has been weakened by the challenges of the campaign, universal mother-love (of the homeland) is still strong but shows signs of fragmentation as the instinct to find a mate is sublimated into an adhesion to more particular nationalist affectations as evidenced in the dreams of young officers. The death-wish remains an undeniable feature of this Army as much as the others. However, all these characters can be habitually found in any large group of men expelled from the home-hearth. It would be going too far to say this is a "sad-state" and I would give the opinion that the 4th Army is collectively suffering from nothing worse than a mild depression for which healthy outdoors activity is the best cure."

The Western Front

The British 4th Army was shocked by the lack of success in the attacks against the SPW Redoubt (5-3.1010). Rawlinson requested that there be a delay in further operations while he rotated troops into the front and gave rest to those who had been at the forefront of the recent fighting. The Canadians were among the fresh forces moving into the 4th Army sector on 30 May.

The French were also active and the French 5th and 10th Armies made a second move forward beyond Nesle (5-3.1012) and Noyon in fulfilment of Joffre's plan to control the flank of the German concentration around Peronne. The advance was cautious and involved no less than four French Army Corps. This time the Germans made no immediate response and by the end of the month the French were in contact with the outworks of the German trench system.



Figure 1: Western Front during May 1916 showing French advance from their start lines (red), 31 May 1916.

The Italian Front

Cadorna issued the most explicit orders to the commanders of the Italian 2nd and 3rd Armies on 28 May. They were to commence fresh attacks at Monfalcone (6-4.3218) and along the Isonzo above Gorizia (6-4.3317) within 48 hours. The main objective was Monfalcone which Cadorna perceived to be vulnerable to a surprise attack. The attacks across the Isonzo were diversions to ensure the Austrians did not concentrate on the coast to defend the road to Trieste. Even so the best estimates of Italian intelligence placed at least five enemy Divisions in the vicinity of Monfalcone and it was expected to be a very difficult objective. The main attraction of this line of advance was that from the west the approaches to Monfalcone were covered by few imposing natural features. The Austrians were securely entrenched but they were on level ground and the Italians knew where their enemies were. This had not been the case in the fighting in more mountainous sectors.

The Italian attacks began again early on 30 May and the next 48 hours saw the bloodiest struggles the Italian Front had seen since the outbreak of the war. The Italian 2nd Army was by now acclimatised to the challenges of clearing the Austrians from their positions overlooking the Isonzo where the terrain was always rough. Familiarity was not a solution and the tough Hapsburg Gebirge

Brigades always exacted a high price for every spur and hollow that they surrendered. General Frugoni commanding the 2nd Army frankly admitted that it cost him three men to despatch one Austrian. This was enough to cause Cadorna to sack him the following month and replace him with General Piacentini.

The Duke of Aosta led the Italian 3rd Army against Monfalcone. This was the real bloodbath and the Italians lost twice as many men here as in the Isonzo Valley but it was not so easy for Cadorna to sack a royal prince. The Italians advanced boldly shouting “Trieste, Trieste” and their bravery was to some effect because the ardour of their attack took several significant positions. Some units of the Italian 10th Division got within a kilometre of Montfalcone. Nevertheless, the Austro-Hungarian 8th Army was not completely unbalanced by this assault and during the night of 30-31 May a major counterattack was planned which in the morning found the Italians disorganised and lacking cover. The further the Italians had advanced the previous day the more grievous their losses on the second day of the battle. The Austrians had kept a reserve of artillery ammunition for just this emergency and the Italians could find no shelter from the gunfire. By the end of 31 May, the Italians held hardly any ground they had not possessed before the start of the attack. The 4th Battle of the Isonzo was over it seemed.



Figure 2: Italian Front up to the end of May 1916, with the advance from the start line (red).

The Eastern Front

The Germans occupied Pinsk, for the second time¹, on 29 May, when several units from the German 25th Division passed through the town. The Russians made no move to resist this.

¹ They had briefly held it in 1915 also.

Further south, the Russians had completed the trench systems which they had thrown up following their advance in Volhynia in April. Brusilov signalled to the Tsar's Headquarters at Mogilev that in his opinion the Russian 9th, 5th and 3rd Armies would soon be ready to attack. The trenches were vital in Brusilov's eyes to allow the Russian infantry to assemble in large numbers safely. It was only south of the Pripet Marshes that any extensive trench systems remained in use by the Russians. Recent activity on the whole of the northern half of the front had been so fluid that investment in deep trenches was disdained.

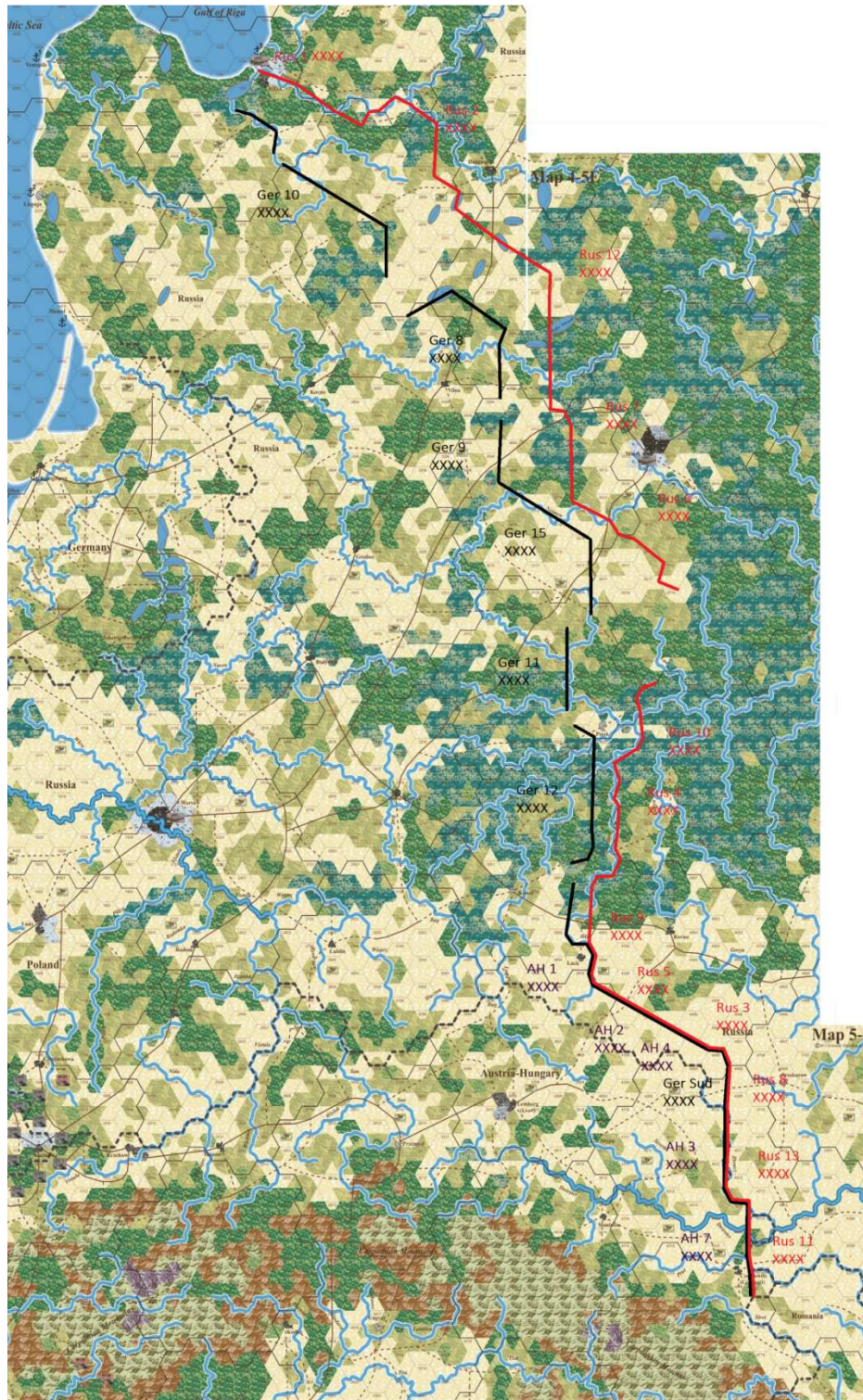


Figure 3: General Situation of the Eastern Front, 31 May 1916.

The Balkans

There was only minor activity on this front in late May 1916. The Serbians had sent reinforcements forward to the Kriva River sector, but there was no action detectible at the front lines which were very quiet.

The Near East

There was little action on any of the Near Eastern Fronts. The daily temperature maximums in Sinai and Iraq had increased dramatically in the last week of May as the unrelenting summer heat took grip. Shade and fresh water were at a premium. It was practically impossible to move anyone in possession of a hammock and an iced drink swinging in the breeze under whatever foliage was on offer.

DM Summary – May 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total [SM%]	Morale
Germany	-	-	7	-	19	20	-	12	58	1232 [77.0]	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	1	4	4	-	-	6	1	16	519 [94.4]	Good
Ottoman	-	-	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	76 [21.7]	Good
Bulgaria	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	21	Good
Central Powers	-	2	12	7	19	20	6	13	75	1848	
France	-	-	10	-	*-	15	-	-	25	737 [81.9]	Good – *Reims re-captured
Great Britain	-	-	-	-	20	17	-	-	37	289 [22.7]	Good
Russia	-	-	2	1	-	-	*-	NA	3	762 [127.0]	Shaken *Pinsk lost
Italy	-	-	11	8	-	-	18	-	37	99 [33.0]	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	(1)	-	-	-	-	-	NA	(1)	(35)	NA
Entente	-	-	23	9	20	32	18	-	102	1887	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: No change - again.*
- *Balkans: Quiet.*
- *West: The counterattack to stem the French advance was my first notable achievement of the WF since 1914's heady advance to the suburbs of Paris. It is not anything which will have major impact on the war at this stage, but the casualty odds worked in my*

favour for once and it may just check him for a period – albeit briefly. Sadly, I lack the supply to both continue to attack and also be in a position to adequately defend. So, contrary to my aspirations, I err on the side of defensive caution. The balance of supply has become critical and I have perhaps too much of it sitting on the EF. There is no danger of my being forced into any unfavourable attacks for a while.

- *Caucasus: I do a lot of shifting again to free troops from the front line and place them in a position along the valley to be able to react quickly to any threats.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet – summer has kicked in.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: I have concentrated a lot more strength along the Isonzo; so I fully expect the Italians to start shifting forces by rail back into the mountains.*

AP: It seems to me that even on turns in which there is little apparently going on it is necessary that I should be making progress to my goals in some way. It wasn't necessary to actually attack in the West this turn because my French advance challenges the Germans to keep attacking the French while they are not entrenched. This will be most difficult around Peronne but I will have the British creating distractions not far from there. There was no need for the British to attack this turn. They need to absorb replacements and the tempo of their offensive does not require attacks every turn. Indeed that would be impractical from a supply point of view.

In contrast, I have thrown the Italians into attack again as soon as possible and in such a way that this will reduce their stocks of supply so that they will be unable to sustain their offensive any longer. The reason was the opportunity of low Austrian supply. The CP will not be able to fully supply both counterattacks this turn. The key attack is at Monfalcone (6-4.3218) which (in anticipation) could be a great success or a terrible disaster. The Austrians have 20 SP defending this hex so fully supplied could inflict 12 losses on the attackers [which is what they got]. This is acceptable because my attack suffers a -2 drm for the trench only and I do not get such moderate combat modifiers often. This is therefore a good chance to inflict a maximum of 6 losses on the Austrians [I got 4 but with 2 also for the second attack]. The total loss ratio was 3:1 against the Italians which is not good, but the 6 losses inflicted against the Austrians serves my purposes well enough in the short term.

Having seen the results of the above attacks, this is a summary of the 4th Isonzo Offensive compared to previous attacks in this sector. This shows that the last offensive was magnitudes greater than my previous efforts on this front but it gives away the intelligence that the 3rd turn of the month is the most likely one for an attack on this front.

Battle	Dates	Italian losses	Austrian losses
1 st Isonzo	June 2 1915	5	4
2 nd Isonzo	October 3 1915	13	5
3 rd Isonzo (Austrian attack)	March 3 1916	4	4
4 th Isonzo	May 3,4 and 7 1916	37	14