

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT159: 19 – 22 June 1916 (5 June)

General Situation

Both Falkenhayn and Conrad were facing similar considerations as mid-summer arrived. It was possible the Allied Offensives had already peaked, but that didn't mean they were ceasing their follow up attacks and both the Germans and Austrian forces had been badly hurt. At the critical parts of the front, in both France and Volhynia, there was a shortage of troops which might get very dangerous if the Allies found the reserves and energy to press forward with renewed determination.

One issue which both commanders complained of was so called "hoarding". There were several army commands in both the West and the East where there was little prospect of action but where the defences were as strong as in the threatened sectors. The local commanders naturally resisted any suggestion that they were over-insured and created phantom Allied Armies in their dispatches to Staff Headquarters. The reality was that the Allies were already committed to their main efforts and their ability and willingness to redeploy and start again somewhere else on less favourable ground was limited.

The Western Front



Figure 1: The CEO Division crushed at La Fere, 19 - 21 June 1916.

The history of the colonial division at La Fere was the inspiration of one of the greatest early black and white films of WWI, *Les Rêves de la Fere* (The Dreams of La Fere) (1934). It is, however, little known now.

The central plot concerns a small section of the Foreign Legion immediately after the withdrawal of the Germans on their front. This occurred on 19 June in actual fact. The hard-bitten cynical and brutalised Legionnaires moved into La Fere the following day finding it little damaged.

In the film, the only officer announces he has a female friend in the town and he disappears to an assignation. Neither the officer, nor the French lieutenant's woman, appears again in the film, but this is the signal for discipline to break down. The squad, none of them French, but instead recruits from all over the world, and many of them ex-criminals, realise they are alone in an undefended town and each one starts to plan how they will use their sudden freedom.

The next part of the film is themed around the seven deadly sins as each character allows one of sloth, gluttony, lust, avarice, pride or the rest to get the better of them. So there are larcenies, whorehouse visits, and drunken stupors all commenced and souls are endangered. However, the good inhabitants of La Fere come out of hiding before long and divert the soldiers from their bad plans often with the help of innocent children.

The day of freedom then becomes a great celebration of the simple honest virtues of La Belle France. The characters build tree houses and mend fences, join in cooking a family meal, entertain a blind man, and put the tricolour on the town hall. By the end of the day the foreign born Legionnaires know what kind of France they are fighting for.

A night is spent watching shooting stars (real ones, not flares) and enjoying a case of wine given by the grateful citizens and mayor. The squad briefly wonder where the lieutenant has got to, but they mainly talk of their plans for when it is all over. No one asks where the Germans went and, although the countryside is devastated in a slightly chic way, no one thinks of getting down to entrenching.

Dawn the next day, and the Legionnaires watch what will be their last sunrise. They are now joined by their comrades from the rest of their unit. The sun's rays, however, blind them to the gathering German Army which appears all at once in a vast semi-circle opposite the French front. An early reviewer said that this scene was reminiscent of Indians appearing suddenly from a canyon in a cowboy film. The last scenes of the film spare the viewer the gory details that modern films would not avoid, but there is no doubt that among the Legionnaires there will be no survivors.

This plot was very loosely based on real events during the war. Essentially the French were left in peace to hold La Fere for little more than 24 hours. Then their most advanced outposts were overrun in a massive sudden silent German infantry charge at dawn on 20 June. Despite this the German recovery did not run into La Fere itself and the town was fated to be badly damaged by being so close to the front line.

The sudden silent infantry charge was apparently the *tactique du jour* for the British tried it two days later. Nowhere had the fall of Peronne and La Fere cause more consternation than in Haig's headquarters. The British had been battering for a month at the German lines and in the round and at the scale of a military hex they had nothing to show for it. The French, on the other hand, danced around for an extended period going backwards as much as forwards and then shuffled towards their objective rather slowly, shouted "*boum*", and the whole German front seemed to suffer from a fainting fit and retreated away. This was how the British understood what the French were calling the "French Method" which they proclaimed as if they had single-handedly discovered the secret to winning the war.

This was more than the patriotic British of that era could easily suffer and it was no surprise that Haig allowed himself to be induced to approve another of Allenby's poorly planned attacks. The

British 3rd Army conducted the so-called Hamelincourt assault on 22 June (5-3.1009). It was in reality nothing much more than a desperate charge across no-man's land and perversely Allenby was priding himself on the lack of artillery preparation (who needs shells when you have a trench club?). To call the results a disaster would not be to adequately capture the full reality. The British attack (not for the first time) ignored the rudimentary requirements of handling the solid German defences. Modern historians say the ratio of British and Canadian losses against German losses was something like 7 to 1. Those that now argue that this was all part of a well thought out attrition strategy cannot easily defend what happened at Hamelincourt, and those who say the attack was motivated by jealousy of the French successes have never really been shown to be wrong. There was a cover up too. Allenby did not at first admit the full scale of his losses. The truth dribbled out days later. The Official History, when it was produced, continued the conspiracy of silence and dealt with the whole episode in a single paragraph. There was never any map produced illustrating the operation as any plan would have highlighted its stupidity.

The Italian Front

Boroević had recently been promoted to command the Austro-Hungarian 8th Army, in addition to his existing responsibility for the 6th Army. He was an example of a growing club of Army Group Commanders. He considered the defences of his forces much improved since the Italian offensive. Nevertheless, he expressed concern on 20 June in a report to the War Minister that the morale of the troops was being affected by the news from the Eastern Front. He thought it could still be described as good but he warned that he no longer took this for granted day by day.

The Eastern Front



Figure 2: The Russian Steamroller, 18 - 22 June 1914.

The Russian offensive had been going on for nearly two weeks. The Austrians had been forced to give up ground and the Russians rolled forward on a broad front. The old image of the Russian Steamroller, which had been in its shed for over a year, was brought back onto the front page of Allied newspapers everywhere as the story of their successes started to spread more widely.

The most aggressive Russian forces were the 5th and 9th Armies which were still dealing heavy blows against the Austro-Hungarian 2nd and 1st Armies. A goal of the Russians was to reach their frontier and cross back onto enemy territory. This they expected to be a telling blow to Hapsburg morale. By 22 June the most advanced Russian spearheads were closing in on the border. The Russian 5th Army moved forwards fastest along the main road from Rovno to Lemberg and defeated the Austrian 151st Division at Batkiv (5-5.4006). This was only a short march from Brody (5-5.3907) on the Austrian side of the border. The Russian 9th Army was meanwhile trying to prise wider open a gap between the Austrians and the German 12th Army around Kowel and had reached Pavlivka (5-5.3604).

The Balkans

Whatever was occurring on this front between 19 and 22 June 1916 is obscure. The authors have consulted many sources, though the Bulgarian archive is closed to us, and nothing really stands out as worthy of mention.

The Near East



Figure 3: Russian preparations for an attack postponed, 18 - 22 June 1916.

Events in the Near East were also unfolding rather slowly at this stage of the war. Yudenitch had been rather obviously, it might be said, making plans for an attack in the central section of the front in Armenia. These plans had to be postponed due to an argument between Yudenitch and the

commander of the IV Caucasus Corps which had been transferred from the Black Sea front. Yudenitch suspected his subordinate had a lack of commitment and an intention to hold back part of his force for supposed supply difficulties. Yudenitch sacked this officer but he was delayed by the difficulty of finding a suitable replacement that he trusted would conduct the attack as he wished.

DM Summary – June 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total [SM%]	Morale
Germany	9	4	20	16	3			12	64	1296	Good
Austria-Hungary	-	-	22	-	7			1	30	549	Good
Ottoman	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	76	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	1	1	-			-	2	23	Good
Central Powers	9	4	43	19	11			13	97	1947	
France	14	-	4	8	4			-	30	767	Good
Great Britain	-	11	12	-	14			-	37	326	Good
Russia	1	-	*14	5**	3			-	23	786	Shaken *Pinsk and **Luck recaptured
Italy	-	-	-	-	-			-	-	99	Good
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-			NA	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	-	(2)	(2)	-			NA	(2)	(39)	NA
Entente	15	11	30	13	18			-	90	1964	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: Recovering – or trying to – from the Brusilov offensive I withdraw and straighten some of my AH lines; keeping the new line just outside of AH itself. I had contemplated leaving single brigades in the forward trenches to delay him but then thought better of it as he could sweep them up (even at the cost of supply) with fair chance of my causing no retaliatory casualties as I would be forced to retreat on every occasion. I also made a rules error in thinking that SR 14-4 allowed me to use all units in a hex (which the rule clearly states) to measure against losses forcing a retreat. For that reason I had garrisoned a trench with a 7-5 GE XX and three arty brigades believing that it would not be attacked as the losses could not be inflicted which would force a retreat. Of course, Robert being a master of the rules system found a clause which does not allow for this and which I had not logged. He very magnanimously allowed me to get away with it this time. The German forces also commence a fall back and start to dispatch a Div from each army to the south to support AH.*
- *Balkans: I rebalance once again after his last attack. Interestingly, this attack led to the first loss of a Montenegrin formation within our game.*

- *West: Robert asked me if I wished to reconsider the withdrawal I made on the WF after he delivered another tremendous blow to me at La Fere (18 hits with rolls I only dreamed of when I was making my successive offensives on this front). I have declined this sportsmanlike offer for reasons I do not wish to disclose too much here. However, whilst it still allows him a target which can be assailed from three directions; that is against a strongly manned and well defended position. I believe he is nervous of exposing his French too much to counter attacks as he only advanced in an under strength CEO XX which I am able to attack with overwhelming force and no use of supply. The British are quite low on supply so I do not feel overly threatened there, but the French have hoarded supply and are still very offensively capable. However, I do sense a wariness of losses amongst the French.*
- *Caucasus: I fear an attack is coming in the centre of my line and his positions along Lake Van are now reinforced – too strongly for me to clear. So, I have started to move force elements from Lake Van to the centre.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

AP: I limited my losses of the French by advancing only one division at La Fere which inevitably gets slaughtered. This tactic is not as wasteful as it seems. If I do not order any advances the Germans can retreat from combat with impunity and then reoccupy the trenches having reduced the losses incurred. I did this a couple of times myself at Verdun.

It is so long since I have had such a general offensive that perhaps the Austrians have forgotten how to defend. I got high dice in two attacks in Poland this turn and AH is now 1 DM away from Shaken Morale. The AH front is in an awkward position as, if I cross the frontier, I will start to interfere with the Austrian harvest which the CP can ill afford. On the other hand standing and fighting on the frontier is not great either as there is little good terrain.

It seems the CP will rely on me running out of supply. That will happen more abruptly with the Russians. The British did a wholly unsupplied attack again this turn and again I forgot that this is a solid front so I had to do a correction to the losses there again. The loss ratio was 14:2 against the British. I think I have done enough unsupplied attacks for now.

The point above about hoarding is that I do think the CP could do more to concentrate against the point of attack. There are several armies currently who have strong defences – 4 Divisions per hex – which will not likely ever be attacked. On long stretches of front in the West and East, the CP could withdraw at least a Division from the front line and put it into reserve able to move to reinforce actual points of attack.

I chose my attack zones because they are the most favourable places for an offensive and my ideal situation is if I can attack the same hex multiple times steadily weakening it. If I switched to attack a different sector even a relatively short distance away it would take some time to get equivalent force to the new zone and any offensive in such places ought to be welcomed by the CP as a deviation from my best course. Defence has got to involve as much movement as the attack in this game with the Defence rushing to increase the strength of threatened hexes (and relatively few are really threatened) faster than the attack can weaken them. There should be a lot of lateral movement

behind the front. German infantry with 5 MA already entrained can even reinforce front line trenches in clear terrain within 10 hexes in the same turn (1 MP to move ten hexes by rail, 1MP to enter clear or broken hex, 2 MP for the trench, 1 MP for the ZOC).

I also think the CP would benefit from more divisions on the map (deep insight!). There are 5-5 Divisions in the German dead pile but no 8-5s. The reverse would perhaps be better as the 5-5s allow finer adjustments of strength on the map. It wouldn't be a disaster to have reduced strength units either as they allow more flexibility as to strength on the front. The 8-5s are certainly a big help to Germany on the attack but they are a luxury on defence as you will hardly ever stack six of them in one hex (Peronne perhaps) as defence just needs to be more spread around. This is going to be truer as the war expands to Romania. Fortunately for the CP there should be a good influx of replacements and cheap Divisions arriving during the late summer of 1916.