

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT175: 28 – 31 August 1916 (7 August)

General Situation

It was widely said that the roads of Wallachia had never seen such an exodus since 1458. Then the Vovoide, Vlad III Dracul, had announced he was concerned about some discrepancies in the tax returns of the Danube communes and he proposed to make unannounced flying visits to investigate. Having left no doubt that anyone responsible for draining his treasury might pay by having something more precious drained from them; anyone who could get their possessions onto a cart had fled seeking safety with the Turks, or the Moldovians, according to opportunity.

So it was also in 1916. Nationalist mythology in Romania had for years painted the Hapsburgs as bloodsuckers leaching off their fellow countrymen in Transylvania. The message had now been intensified by propaganda concerning the seizure of crops in Poland and the harsh treatment of the population there. Since OberOst had published dire warnings to the rural population of the consequences of failure to cooperate there was nothing to stop the fear of occupation running wild.

Accordingly once there were clear signs that the Romanian Army was pulling back in Western Romania, then much of the rural population quickly packed their bags too. It was hardly a controlled retreat either, more a rush to the exits.

The situation was perfectly captured in the novel, *Last Train from Craiova*, by Liviu Petrescu nominated for the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature. This communicated to the world the desperation of an uprooted people. It is often misinterpreted, especially the famous chapter where the Mayor of a small Romanian town sells his grandmother to get space for his family in the corner of an overcrowded carriage on a train heading for Bucharest. What most readers missed was that the use of grandmothers as collateral for transactions had a long history in the region on account of the jewellery from which they could not be separated. There was in peacetime a market in Craiova in which grandmothers were traded in bulk and without them the whole property market in the Lower Danube region would have lost all liquidity. Neither can it be said that the market did not function well. In normal times, the pledged elders were allowed to live at home under the watchful eyes of their neighbours (acting for the lenders) and the only regulation which the mortgagees required was to prevent unsupervised visits to the dentist and to maintain the right to check under the old ladies' mattresses.

The Eastern Front

Amid the exodus of the refugees, the Romanian Army in Western Wallachia was falling back in forced marches. The many rivers flowing across the region were large obstacles to this flight and every time a bottleneck was created near a bridge panic threatened to break out should any rumour spread concerning the approach of the enemy. In fact, the Romanians were comfortably ahead of most of their pursuers. Nevertheless, an advance guard of the Bulgarian 12th Division reached the Jiul River not far from Craiova on 29 August and the last train left the city that evening.

29 August was also the date of a decisive encounter on the River Danube at Cernavoda (6-6.2614) where the railway crossed the river on the line between Bucharest and Constanta. Cernavoda had been the chosen base of Admiral Bratianu who commanded a small flotilla of gunboats providing support for the Romanian 3rd Army holding the line between Cernavoda and Constanta. Since the

outbreak of hostilities, the Austrians had steamed their own Danube fleet down through the Iron Gates and they had managed to pass the length of the river along the Bulgarian-Romanian frontier. In late August, this fleet had been concentrated under the command of Admiral Körös on the river not far upstream of the Romanian base. Once Körös was aware of the proximity of the enemy he resolved to strike with his superior strength.



Figure 1: The destruction of the Romanian flotillas at Cernovoda.

There are few accounts of this river battle.¹ However, one famous witness was Baron von Trapp who commanded a torpedo boat in Commodore Almos' squadron. His daughter published his account² as follows:

"...The Admiral had hoped for surprise and the whole fleet went down river silently very slowly and with few lights. The river mists made it exceptionally important we did not get separated and I followed Almos' lead with only a few metres between his boat and mine. As the hours passed our nerves were very much on edge and to relieve the tension I asked the engineer to list for me a few of his favourite things which, I have never forgotten, were Parma Violets, lacquered cups, and forget-me-nots. I would never have guessed this. I would have said chewing tobacco and lubricating oil were his sole interests but you discover a lot about people in combat.

Inspired by the engineer's response, I distracted myself by trying to turn his list into a song but I was shaken from this reverie by sudden blasts of gunfire which must have come from the Admiral's

¹ Cernovoda in Slavic languages means "black water". There are today raging debates on the internet whether the author George RR Martin drew inspiration for the Battle of the Blackwater from this naval action in 1916 or from the Battle of Maldon in 991 which occurred beside the Blackwater Estuary in Essex, England.

² *The Secret War of Baron von Trapp*, Anna von Trapp, (New York) 1966.

squadron opening up on the Romanian base. It was dawn and within minutes the mist was illuminated by red and orange glows where a ship might be burning. We pressed on following Almos' tail. Our orders were to prevent any Romanian vessels escaping north. We reached our station and waited listening to the firing behind us peering into the mist at every shape that threatened to become substantial.

I would like to say we fired our torpedoes, but when we were recalled at noon we re-joined the Admiral to discover that there was little further that needed to be done. The wrecks of the Romanian boats were still burning. I counted six and we called this our Jutland. Only two of our ships had suffered much damage. I was surprised Almos' gunboat was among them. He had struck a mine during our passing of Cernovoda during the early hours but the damage had been contained and he had pressed on regardless. I never heard the explosion. A number of enemy sailors were rescued and came on board. I tried to cheer them up by having the squadron choir sing to them but their mood remained subdued..."

With all of Bratianu's gunboats sunk, the Romanian 3rd Army began retreating on 30 August concerned that the Austrians would use their control of the Danube to get into their rear. This withdrawal meant that Constanta was abandoned.

The panic which was spreading in Romania was amplified by this naval defeat at Cernavoda, but the biggest cause was the inexorable pressure of the Central Powers' that was being applied in Moldavia. At the end of the month, Jassy had still not been occupied by the enemy who concentrated on clearing out the wooded hills to the west of the city which had concealed the Allied forces prior to their recent short lived successful counter attacks. There was nevertheless a vigorous push down the Siret River as far as Parpanița (6-6.1704) which the German 31st Division captured on 29 August. During the combats in Moldavia in late-August, the Russian 14th Army had severe difficulties holding ground. Its stores were much depleted and communications were extremely poor due to the loss of control of key railways. If the Central Powers' had enjoyed the benefit of a good communications network, then the situation would have been even more difficult for the Allies but in fact both sides were operating without the advantage of a good railway network.

At the other end of the long Eastern Front, the German 10th Army was still active looking for a way across the Nevežis River. On 28 August, a bridgehead was gained in the vicinity of Szawli (4-5N.1312) and Russian forces around Radviliškis (4-5N.1412) were driven away from the river. General Ruzsky commanding the Russian Northern Front urged his subordinates in the 1st, 2nd and 12th Armies to cooperate and seize the opportunities that he perceived of weakness on the flanks of the German thrust. This had been a feature of many Central Powers' operations in the East, but this time Ruzsky was unable to persuade the army commanders that they had the strength to undertake such an operation. "*Weakness could not defeat weakness,*" replied General Litvinov (1st Army) before ordering further Russian retreats on 30 August.

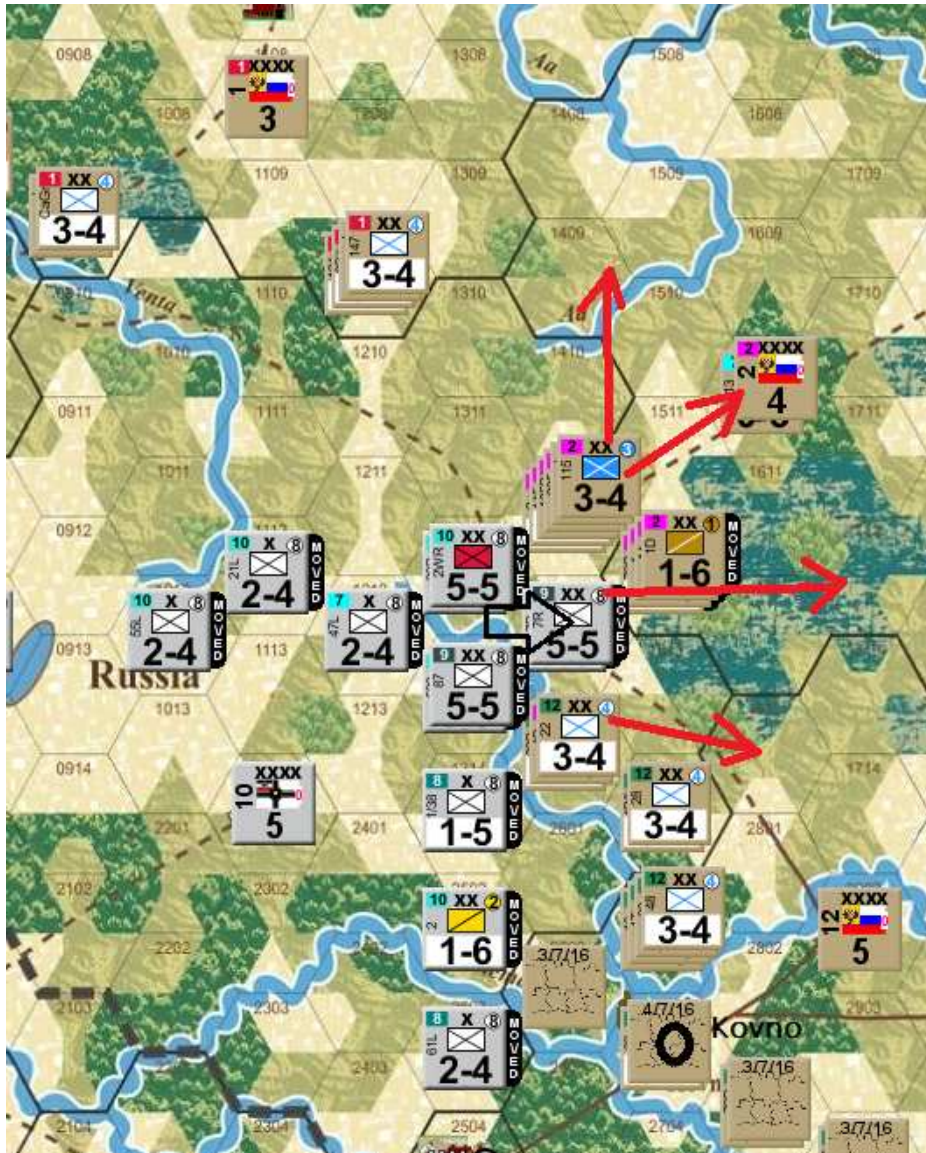


Figure 2: The German 10th Army passes the Nevežis River at Szawli, 28 – 29 August 1916.

The Balkans

There were some minor adjustments of the front. In particular, the Bulgarians had pulled back across the Struma River near the Greek border and the Serbians slowly occupied their former positions.

In addition, the Italians had reinforced their forces in the Balkans sending two Alpine Brigades to Scutari. There they were little more than a week's march from Austria's naval base at Cattaro.

The Near East

There was little activity in the Near East. Maude pulled back from the Turkish lines around Baghdad. The Turks were consolidating their recent gains in Armenia.

Italian Front

The lull in operations persisted as the Italian staff debated what to do next.

DM Summary – August 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total [%SM]	Morale
Germany	1	1	-	-	19	12	19	9	61	1404 [87.8]	Good
Austria-Hungary	3	1	4	2	4	-	-	-	14	584 [106.2]	Shaken
Ottoman	-	-	6	-	1	1	-	-	8	88 [24.1]	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	4	27	Good
Central Powers	4	2	12	2	28	13	19	-	87	2106	
France	-	-	-	-	8	4	6	-	18	808 [89.8]	Good
Great Britain	-	-	9	-	-	16	13	-	38	391 [30.7]	Good
Russia	3	1	5	-	5	3	2	-	19	839 [139.8]	Shaken
Italy	-	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	10	109 [36.3]	Good
Romania	-	3	1	-	6	2	3	-	15	16	
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NA	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	-	(1)	-	-	-	-	NA	(1)	(40)	NA
Entente	3	4	25	-	19	25	24	-	100	2150	

Player Notes

CP:

- East: I realise that, in a race to get Russia to economic collapse before AH, AH will lose. However, I have to maintain the pressure on Russia deny it the ability to build up another Brusilov-style offensive opportunity and to keep it fearful of economic collapse. It is very difficult to do much to Russia outside of what it is prepared to allow you to do due to the Grave Threat Line behind which it can always skulk. I think this is one area of the rules I am not a fan of. At the moment, whilst I have good offensive opportunities opening up to me in Romania, by stacking Russian forces with the Romanians Robert is bolstering them but soaking up losses from the Romanian forces, who are still fresh and under no DM pressure. This is good and sensible play, but adds to the frustration I feel over the overall effects of the GTL on CP strategic options. Anyway, my 10th (Baltic) Army is strong and continues to throw punches, doing so again this turn. Nothing but standoff exists across the broad central front and into the south. Only in Transylvania and Moldavia am I able to launch any attacks; all against combined Russian-Romanian*

forces. So, the Romanians will soak up losses and continue to withdraw gradually. I have captured some food producing areas in Romania and deliberately avoid the open offer of occupying lassy to avoid responsibility for feeding the population there. For the monthly special turn, it remains a Romanian obligation. My greatest constraint is logistics as I cannot penetrate deeper into Romania until my Engrs have started to lay down more track across the border.

- *Balkans: Quiet in Serbia and Montenegro, but this turn I manage to cross the Danube in several places due to Romanian withdrawals. I had been using my AH Danube flotillas as an interdiction threat for any attempted Romanian crossings. Now that any threats to cross have diminished I free up all of the AH flotillas to launch an attack against the Romanian Danube flotilla. This is the first of any sort of naval encounter in this game and makes for an interesting diversion.*
- *Caucasus: I have started an advance from the west bank of Lake Van along a 100km frontage. I don't see this leading to anything, but it makes me feel better!*
- *Mesopotamia: I prepare to defend the approaches to Baghdad.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

AP: I see from Ivor's notes last turn that he is very pessimistic about the CP's prospects. He still does not like the GTL rule and thinks the food deficit unbalances the game. I strongly disagree.

I was thinking I had gained some advantage during the summer campaign. Most importantly I have a good chance of starting to roll for submarine warfare in October. However, had I not made some progress in my recent campaigns this would have been a total disaster for the Allies. It should be appreciated I stockpiled more than six months' supplies and expended it in a concentrated burst. I cannot repeat that without a further build up.

It would also be a serious disaster for the Allies if they could not get Austria into a state of Economic Collapse in 1916 because there is only a brief opportunity to do so. Scoring the last 16 DM against Austria to get that result will require some canniness. There are 28 turns to do it which should be ample, but already there are few solely Austrian stacks outside the Italian front. Once Germany and the other Central Powers protect the Austrians with joint stacks the CP can control further demoralisation of Austria to a very high degree.

It is also vital for the Russians to avoid Economic Collapse before 1917. If that means retreat to the GTL, I will do it. Economic Collapse is serious for Russia because it causes the collapse of the Caucasus front and loss of cities there which takes the Russians a long way to surrender. Ivor doesn't like the fact that I can delay this by retreating to the GTL but, in my view, the game is designed so that the CP has to fight a limited war in the East. Rightly so I say, because a non-limited war ought to massively increase Russian morale resources. In any event, such is the state of the Russian railways the CP would be unable to reach the GTL in some places this year before winter and not very far beyond elsewhere. Accordingly, I don't see Russian survival into 1917 or even 1918 in other than neutral terms. Just because they are still in the game doesn't mean they are in much of a position to hurt the CP. Russian morale now only increases by 50 DM each year - half as much as Austria. All that matters is how much DM the Russians can inflict on the CP. I would not expect much now from offensive operations.

The Romanian collapse under way which, excuse my French, is a Class 1 FU is a true sign that fighting power in this game is a subtle thing and arrives in anticipation of critical morale thresholds. Russia is further away from its threshold than Austria is, but Russia does not have a big brother to look after it.

The Austrians are still good for an auxiliary role even in offensive operations (though they are pushing it a bit which is giving me counter strike opportunities. The Russians are now cringing behind the Romanians even in defensive operations.

The last component of CP strength at the moment is the defensive positions in the West and Italy. As the Russian front slowly declines in significance it will become increasingly easier for the CP to build stronger defences on these fronts. They are already quite a bit stronger than they were and Allied attacks will be punished with heavy losses. To avoid disproportionate losses I need more supply and artillery but over reliance on conservative tactics will mean I would be too slow to have a chance to win the game. This is where the food deficit rate is important and why I am not agreeing with Ivor that it ought to be possible to substantially eliminate it in the East. This would just force the Western Allies to break their armies in the West chasing very onerous monthly attrition targets.

My latest attack in France is a sign of some stress. It was of combat strength 105 whereas I have recently managed over 140. Supply is running low and French morale is inching up. I am not prepared to let up just yet but the offensive is not what it was in May and June. I love the way this game can pick up the exhaustion of effort. I have never encountered a wargame before which depicts progressive exhaustion in such an unforced and organic way. It also shows the benefits of resting as well. It is not obvious but nations which rest their forces for a few months or even a turn or two benefit from an increase in morale. That is the rate at which they can afford losses during the rest of the game increases. When you are pacing action in this game you are moderating the impact of losses on your own side to achieve objectives without destroying the fighting qualities of your forces by over-exerting them. That is what I am risking in the continuation of the fighting in the West.