

1915–The Second War Year

by Alfred F. Kugel

The Strategic Situation

By the beginning of 1915, the intensity of the fighting had died down temporarily with neither side having been able to deliver a knockout blow in their early efforts. The troops were fairly well exhausted, and the huge losses in men and materiel sustained in 1914 needed to be replaced. Naturally, both sides were looking for some development that would provide hope for victory in the ensuing year.

In the case of the Allies, attention was concentrated on inducing Italy to join in, thus draining off Austro-Hungarian troops from the Russian front to defend the border on the south. On the offensive side, the primary British-French effort involved an invasion of the Dardanelles, undertaken in the hope of splitting European from Asiatic Turkey and occupying Constantinople, thus providing a chance to drive that country out of the war.

As to the Central Powers, the German High Command believed that a breakthrough by either side on the Western front was quite unlikely in 1915, so they decided to shift their primary offensive effort to the Eastern front, where they conducted a successful campaign to force the Russians out of Poland and Lithuania. Moreover, they were able to liberate almost all of the Austrian Province of Galicia from Russian occupation. Elsewhere, Bulgaria joined as a new member, thus providing the additional manpower needed to bring about the overrunning of Serbia late in the year.

Activity in the Pacific and Far East was relatively calm, following a brief flurry of activity in 1914. Neither of the power groups felt that it could spare the resources that might make a difference in Europe.

Stalemate in the West

Immediately after the German defeat at First Marne by the French, General Von Moltke was relieved of command as Chief of the General Staff and replaced by General von Falkenhayn. By the end of 1914, an extensive system of trenches had been completed over the entire 400-mile Western front from Switzerland to the North Sea. Falkenhayn's view was that this situation provided significant advantages to the defenders to the point that it seemed highly unlikely that any attempt at a large-scale offensive would be successful. Indeed, he believed that the best chance for a German victory in the near term would come as a result of the Allies seeking to end the fighting after squandering a large number of their troops in futile attacks.

On the other hand, the Allied Commanders, Generals Joffre and French, still believed that one great battle could collapse the German position. As a result, there were mighty struggles in such places as Ypres, Artois and Champagne during 1915, with great loss of life but little change in either the tactical or strategic situation.

In fact, it can be argued that the most significant fact about the Western front at this point was that the defensive positions were so solidified on both sides that for the next three years the trench lines with few exceptions did not change by as much as ten miles.

The Germans Turn East

By adopting a defensive posture in the west, the Germans were able to shift several army corps to the east in order to deal with the Russians. A giant pincers movement was envisaged from both the north and south of Russian Poland, with the goal being to surround a major part of the Russian army and force that country out of the war. The northern thrust started with the Battle of the Masurian Lakes in late February and early March 1915. To the south, the Battle of Gorlice-Tarnów at the southwest corner of Galicia started in April. Both of these efforts were very successful tactically, and Warsaw itself was captured on August 5, 1915.

However, the grand plan with regard to trapping the Russian army



Figure 1. Picture card of the Austro-German entry into Warsaw.

in Poland failed strategically as its commander, Grand Duke Nicholas, perceived the threat and managed to withdraw most of his army to the east before the pincers could close. Figure 2 shows the Russian army retreating from Galicia. As a result of this action, by the end of the year the Germans and Austro-Hungarians had driven the enemy 200 miles eastward, thus clearing Russian Poland and Lithuania, as well as most of Austrian Galicia. See Figure 3 for a map of 1915 gains by the Central Powers on the Eastern Front. On this basis, the situation was deemed sufficiently



Figure 2. Picture card of the Russian retreat from Galicia.

stabilized that the German authorities decided to initiate postal service for the inhabitants of occupied Poland. As a result, the first postage stamps consisting of five Germania definitives overprinted "Russian Poland" were issued on May 12, 1915; these are shown on cover as Figure 4.



Figure 3. Map of the 1915 Gains of the Central Powers on the Eastern Front.



Figure 4. Occupation stamps overprinted "Russian Poland" issued on May 12, 1915, used by the Swiss Consul. Special cachet notes diplomatic personnel could use international mail.

The Invasion of the Dardanelles

An entirely new front in the war was opened when the Allies decided to undertake an attempt to force the Straits of the Dardanelles at the exit from the Black Sea into the Aegean. Strongly supported by Winston Churchill, the British First Lord of the Admiralty, this plan was set in motion in early 1915 in an attempt to split European Turkey from the Asian part, capture Constantinople and open up a warm water route for sending military supplies to Russia.

The plan was bold and came close to succeeding, but it failed because of poor judgments by the senior officers in command, followed by a wasteful landing of infantry on the rugged Gallipoli Peninsula and some quick bolstering of the Turkish defenses by the Ger-

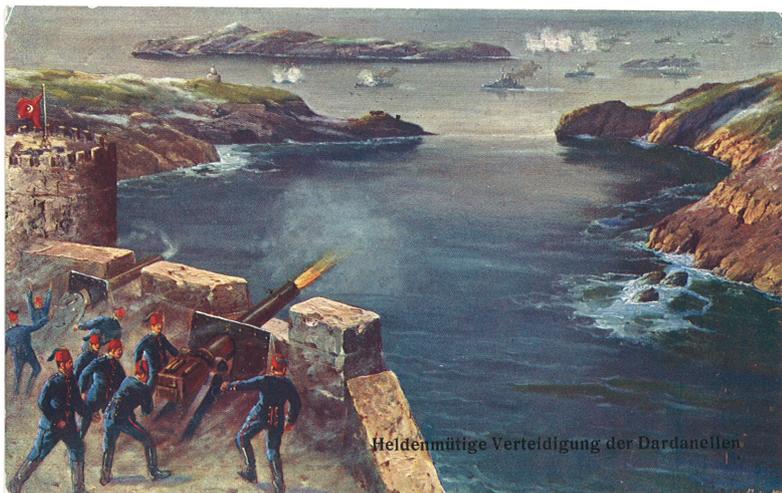


Figure 5. Picture card of artillery duel between Turkish defenders and Allied warships.

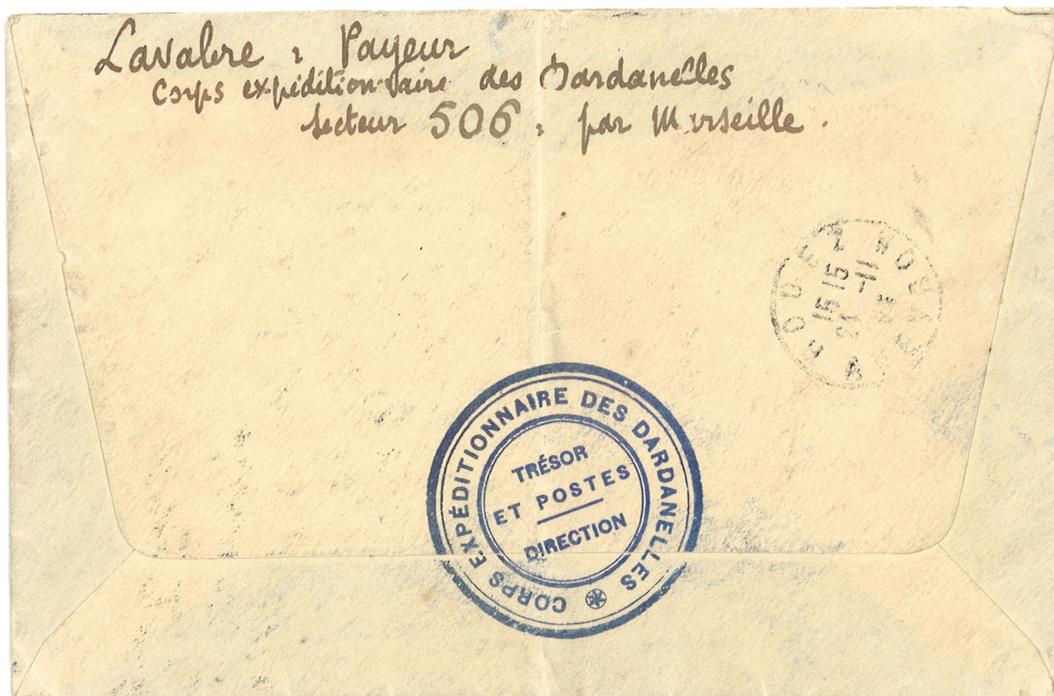


Figure 6. Fieldpost cover from a French member of the Dardanelles Expeditionary Corps.

man Military Mission. Figure 5 shows a picture card of an artillery duel between the Anglo-French fleet and the Turkish defenders.

The initial phase was designed as a strike by a strong naval force (consisting mostly of older battleships and battle cruisers) which attempted to steam through the Straits, clearing the minefields and bombarding the defensive artillery positions. This plan was unleashed by attacks in February and March 1915 but called off because of heavy losses to major ships, which frightened the naval leaders. A modified plan was then adopted, calling for the landing of troops on the Peninsula to force off the Turkish defenders and make a successful naval thrust easier.

This phase got underway in April but it, too, became bogged down due to poor implementation and heavy casualties. Figure 6 shows a fieldpost cover from a French member of the Dardanelles Expeditionary Corps. In the end, the invasion was called off and the troops evacuated in January 1916 after eight months of struggle and despite considerable gallantry on the part of the Imperial forces from Australia and New Zealand (ANZACs).



Figure 7. Italian fieldpost card used from the Carnero front in August 1915.

The Italians Come In

With the fighting on the Western Front having become bogged down in the trenches by late 1914, both sides were seeking ways to change the power equation into something that would provide the chance of achieving a more favorable outcome. On this basis, Italy became the prime target of promises of territorial enhancement after the war on the part of both camps. In effect, Italy sold itself to the highest bidder, once it realized that it would have more to gain in the event of an Allied victory and an Austrian defeat than otherwise.

The promises were embodied in the Treaty of London signed by the members of the Triple Entente on April 25, 1915, which envisaged the transfer of the Austrian-

held territories of the Trentino, Venezia Giulia (Istria) and northern Dalmatia, as well as the port of Valona in Albania, to Italy after the end of the war. Following up on this agreement, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary four weeks later on May 23.

Unfortunately, the Italian army was not adequately prepared for large-scale action. Figure 7 is an Italian fieldpost card mailed from the Carnero Front. Although they fought bravely, the troops were poorly led and ill-equipped, and the men suffered heavy casualties trying to advance against the Austrian forces in the easily defended Alpine border region. Figure 8 is a picture card showing the first Italian victory over the Austrians. In total, some 650,000 Italian soldiers died; an even larger number were wounded during the fighting and 400,000 more ended up as prisoners of war - all without much positive result until the very end of the fighting.

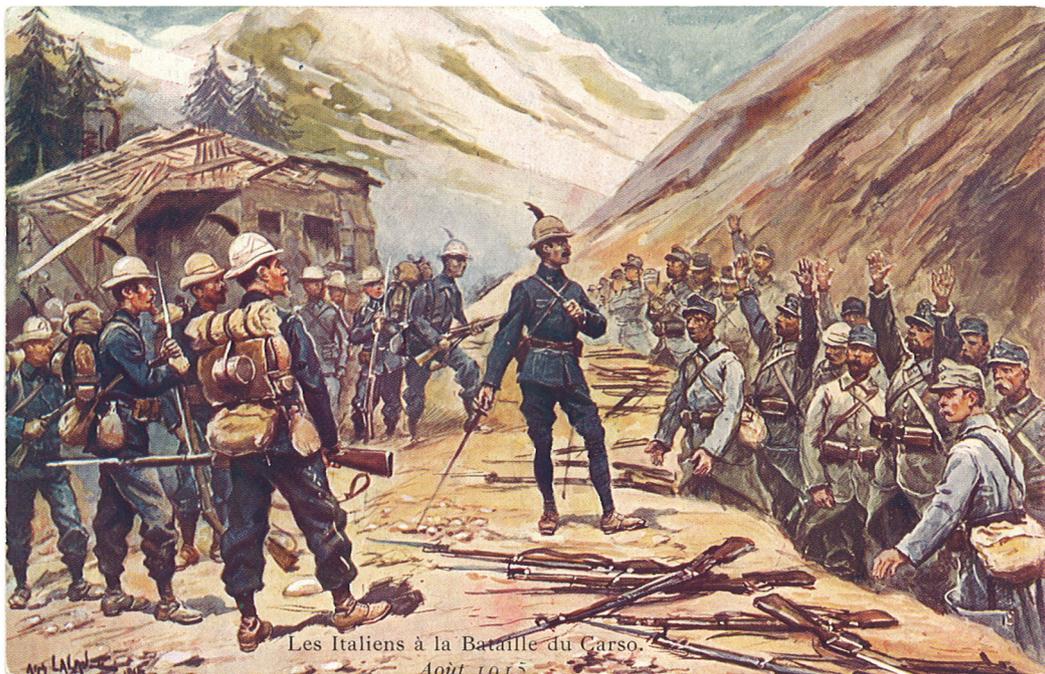


Figure 8. Picture card of the first Italian victory against Austro-Hungarian troops.

The Bulgarians Join In

Having been part of the victorious coalition with Greece, Montenegro and Serbia against Turkey in the First Balkan War in 1912, Bulgaria felt deprived of some of the spoils to which it felt entitled when Serbia, Greece and Romania defeated it during the brief Second Balkan War in 1913 and took for themselves some of the territory initially intended for Bulgaria. As a result, it was receptive to German entreaties that it join the Central Powers and redress the earlier territorial wrongdoing. On this basis, Bulgaria agreed and prepared to provide fresh troops for an attack on Serbia from the east, which would supplement the thrust by a large Austro-German force invading from the north. Figure 9 is a Bulgarian fieldpost card sent by a member of the pioneer corps (engineers).

Serbia is Overwhelmed

Serbia had enjoyed a respite following the 1914 invasion and subsequent withdrawal of the Austro-Hungarian forces. Moreover, a substantial portion of the remain-

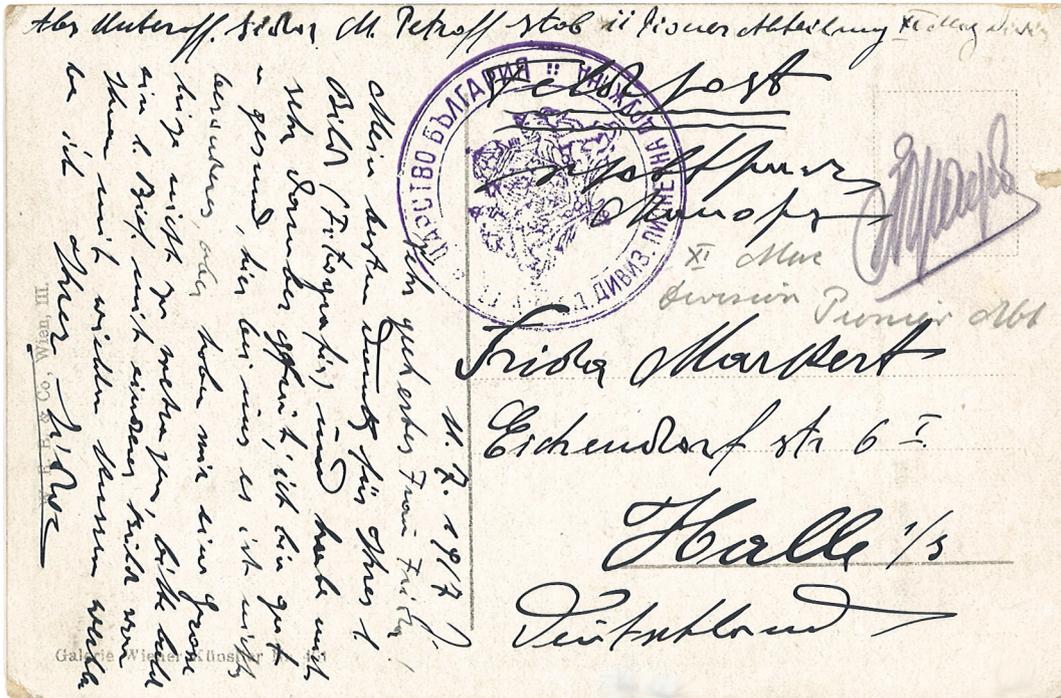


Figure 9. Bulgarian fieldpost card sent by a member of the pioneer corps (engineers).

ing Austrians in the Balkan area had been shifted to the Italian front after that country declared war. However, the Germans were able to muster a new 11th Army (consisting of the available Austrian forces plus fresh German troops under Field Marshal Mackensen) which was poised along the Danube.

The invasion from the north got underway in early October and was supplemented by a Bulgarian thrust from the east. Figure 10 is a picture card showing Bulgarians attacking in Serbia. The Serbs had already been weakened by their successful defensive efforts during the prior year and were simply unable to cope with the new assaults.

As a result, the Austro-German forces occupied Belgrade on October 9, as shown on the picture card designated Figure 11.

Following some initial resistance, the best plan that the Serbs could come up with was to conduct a gradual strategic retreat to



Figure 10. Picture card of Bulgarian attack on Serbia.



Figure 11. Picture card showing Austro-German entry into Belgrade.

the west, thus abandoning the most heavily populated parts of the country. In due course, much of the army was able to withdraw through the mountains of Albania, ending up in the port of Scutari, whence they were evacuated by Allied ships to the Greek island of Corfu and other Allied-controlled areas. Figure 12 shows the Serbians



Figure 12. Picture card of Serbian retreat through Albania.

retreating through Albania, with King Peter in a wagon drawn by oxen along the route through the mountains.

Once on Corfu, the troops were rested and reequipped for use in a later campaign. In the meantime, Serbia itself would be occupied for the next three years by Austro-Hungarians in the north and west and by Bulgarians in the south and east. Figure 13 is an Austrian fieldpost card franked with one of the occupation stamps for Serbia.



Figure 13. Fieldpost card franked with stamp overprinted “Serbia” used from the Austrian occupation zone. (Postage required due to international destination.)

Action in Africa

At the beginning of 1915, the three largest German colonies – East Africa, Southwest Africa and the Cameroons – continued their resistance, thus tying down a considerable number of Allied troops in activities that were not central to the winning of the war. However, progress was made, and by year end the campaigns to subdue the two latter territories had been successfully concluded.

However, East Africa was another matter entirely, with the *Schutztruppe* (protectorate forces) consisting of native Askaris led by German officers successfully carrying out a form of guerilla warfare that the British were never able to fully overcome. As a result, the last of the defenders remained active and didn’t surrender until they could be convinced that the war had actually ended in Europe in November 1918.

Activity on the Turkish Frontiers

One of the most important aspects of Turkey joining the Central Powers was that it opened up several additional war theaters to which the Allies would have to commit troops that were sorely needed elsewhere. Aside from the battle in the

Dardanelles, there were campaigns in Transcaucasia, Mesopotamia, the Sinai and Anatolia. The problem for the Turks was that they became overcommitted and, thus, were not very successful in any of these battlegrounds, with their soldiers ending up on the defensive in all of the areas.

The end of December 1914 and early 1915 brought the first Ottoman attempt to invade Russian territories in the Caucasus. Their strategic goal was to drive the



Figure 14. Picture card of Russians and Turks fighting in the Caucasus.

Russian forces northward and liberate Kars and Batum. However, due to poor tactics and severe winter weather, the Turks were blocked and, following the Battle of Sarikamiş which ended on January 15, forced to retreat to their base at Erzerum. Figure 14 shows an early battle between Turks and Russians in Caucasia. This led to an invasion of eastern Anatolia in which Russian forces eventually fought their way as far west as Trebizond, a major Turkish port on the south coast of the Black Sea, where they remained in place for the next two years.

As to Mesopotamia, the British were initially concerned about a possible Turkish attack across the border into southwestern Persia, which contained the strategic oil refinery at Abadan and the nearby producing fields, which supplied fuel for the British Navy. On this basis, they organized an early attack by the Indian Expeditionary Force to seize the port of Fao on the Persian Gulf and advance on the major city of Basra. As it turned out, the Ottoman defense was unprepared and there was little resistance. Based on this, General Townsend decided to use armored steamships to move his troops up the Tigris River. In fact, they went as far as Kut-al-Amara (two-thirds of the way from Basra to the provincial capital of Baghdad) before settling down for the end of the 1915 campaign.

In the expectation of fomenting an uprising against the British by the Arabs living in Egypt and with the goal of disrupting traffic through the Suez Canal, the Turks mounted an invasion of the Sinai Peninsula in mid-1915. However, resourc-

es were limited and, even though some of the troops actually reached the banks of the canal, they could not be easily resupplied and soon were forced to retreat back to their bases in Palestine.

All Quiet in Asia & the Pacific

In contrast to all that was going on in Europe, things were very benign on the Asian and Pacific fronts in 1915. The invasion of the former German colonies in those areas had ended quickly in 1914 with little or no fighting, and the subsequent year was devoted to establishing new administrative arrangements by the Allies. The Japanese had taken over Kiauchau on the Shantung Peninsula of China as well as the Caroline, Mariana and Marshall Islands in the Central Pacific (where the initial postal activity was conducted through offices set up by the Imperial Navy). Australia took over the administration of the former German New Guinea, and New Zealand did the same for Western Samoa.

Summary

As described, the first declaration of war took place on July 28, 1914, and, by a year and a half later nearly all of the European countries and most significant ones elsewhere in the world – the United States and China being two major exceptions – had become involved. As it turned out, things did not go as expected by the leaders on either side. By the end of 1915, the armies were again at the point of temporary exhaustion so that the fighting bogged down on both the Western and Eastern fronts, and no one knew what would happen in the next year, particularly with respect to how to improve the odds for a positive outcome or even to reduce the rate of bloodletting.

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