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The reasons for the successful breakthrough at Gorlice

Przyczyny udanego przełamania frontu pod Gorlicami

Abstract: The paper looks at the Austro-German breakthrough at Gorlice of 1915 which lead to a strategic defeat of the Tsarist forces. The authors analyse the strength Russian positions, the use of air reconnaissance by the Central Powers as well as the deployment of heavy artillery and reserves. The morale factor, and, perhaps most importantly, the faulty Russian chain of command are discussed and as the reasons for the Austro-German victory.

Streszczenie: Tekst analizuje przełamanie frontu przez wojska austro-niemieckie pod Gorlicami w 1915 roku, które doprowadziło do strategicznej porażki sił rosyjskich. Autorzy analizują siłę pozycji rosyjskich, użycie przez Państwa Centralne rozpoznania lotniczego, ciężkiej artylerii oraz rezerw. Omówiono również aspekt morale oraz, co najważniejsze, wadliwy łańcuch dowodzenia wojsk carskich.

Keywords: Eastern Front; World War One; Battle of Gorlice; breakthrough; trench warfare.

Słowa kluczowe: front wschodni, I wojna światowa, bitwa pod Gorlicami, wojna pozycyjna

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Introduction

One can find numerous examples of attacks on strongly entrenched positions during the World War One. Most of such actions ended in bloodshed and the attackers gained virtually nothing. Only a few operations were successful, mainly by applying new tactics or introducing new weapons, such as tanks. Neither of those was the reason for the success in the Battle of Gorlice (1915) on the Eastern Front, however. The breaking of the Russian entrenched front there had an immense significance, not only on the tactical, but, even more importantly, operational and strategic levels.¹ It forced the Russians to give up most of what they had conquered in Galicia in the course of 1914 and much of Russian territory.

The primary goal of this article is to study the reasons for this success. We shall also try to compare all the discussed circumstances to those of the Western Front where such a successful offensive was never impossible.

A short characteristics of the Russian positions

It has to be admitted that the Russian frontline fit very well to the mountainous area of Gorlice. At some important places, it consisted of three separate lines of trenches, the first one being the strongest.

The Russian Army had considerable experience in building entrenchments from the war with Japan (1904–05). They tried to place them at some distance from the enemy and to provide the soldiers therein with some cover against shrapnels. However, not all of the trenches were supplied with traverses, which made them vulnerable to high-explosive artillery shells. In effect, heavy bombardment could easily destroy the entire stretches of Russian positions. German soldiers were able to observe as direct hits into the strongpoints threw machineguns with their crews into the

¹ Although this battle was very significant for the course of the Great War, it has not been researched thoroughly in English historiography, and even newest analyses seem to be superficial and lack the Russian perspective (cf. R. L. DiNardo, *Breakthrough: The Gorlice–Tarnów Campaign, 1915*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, Calif. 2010).

air. If a shell exploded inside a shelter, one could observe flying wood, straw and even body parts.²

Barbed wire was in short supply, which meant the Russians had to resort to building *chevaux de frise*. Fougasses placed in front of the first trenches would complement some of the most important stretches of the Russian front.

Generally, as the British military attaché, Sir Alfred Knox, stated, only two lines of defence had been prepared, and the Russians did not change the positions of their batteries although these had been well known to the Austrians long before the beginning of the offensive in May.³ Furthermore, the precious time needed to reinforce the positions was lost because the news of fresh German troops arriving opposite was generally ignored by the Russian command (see below).

Air activity

Each corps of the German 11th Army had an aircraft squadron charged with two principal tasks. The first one was to photograph the most crucial sections of the Russian positions, and the second to help in registering heavy artillery barrage by signalling with red or purple smoke, as the Russians observed.⁴ The Russian 3rd Army lacked anti-aircraft artillery and so was practically unable to disturb this activity. Rifle fire from the ground was ineffective in such cases.⁵

² F. Babendieck, *Staszkowka und die Lipier Höhen. Das Regiment Kaiser Alexander in der Durchbruchschlacht am 2. und 3. Mai 1915*, [in:] *Ehrenbuch der Garde. Die preußische Garde im Weltkriege 1914–1919*, ed. E. von Eisenhardt-Rothe, M. Lezius, vol. 1, Berlin–Stuttgart 1920, p. 188; O. T. von Kalm, *Gorlice*, p. 45.

³ A. W. F. Knox, *With the Russian Army, 1914–1917: Being Chiefly Extracts from the Diary of a Military Attache*, New York 1921, p. 282.

⁴ “Shtab 3-j Armii”, [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija. Sbornik dokumentov*, Moskva 1941, doc. 80, p. 72.

⁵ B. V. Gerua, *Vospominanija o moej zhizni*, Parizh 1969, vol. 2, p. 71.

Located near the center of the 11th Army's position, the Pustki Hill (449 m.a.s.l.) was one of the highest hills within the Russian positions, overlooking much of the frontline north of Gorlice. Not oblivious to its importance, the Russians developed a fortified position with multi-tiered trenches over the course of winter and spring of 1915. The Austrian VI Corps deployed opposite that hill was assigned a German *Fliegerkompanie* whose good quality aerial photographs, essential in planning the artillery fire for the first day of battle, were praised by the Corps' commander.⁶ Naturally enough, other key points of the Russian position were also carefully photographed, which supplemented the outcome of ground observation.

The airmen were able to identify the "concentration of enemy's forces in the region of Jasło–Biecz–Żmigród in the strength of 1–2 divisions."⁷ These were probably the 63th Infantry Division (ID), the 2nd brigade of the 81st ID and the 16th Cavalry Division deployed in the area.⁸ Another report from 28 April said that the Russians were trying to improve their trenches, but behind the front everything is peaceful, even though the Russians had already known about the arrival of the German troops.⁹

Contrary to some authors, we are, however, reluctant to give any more credit for the win to the Austrian and German aviation. After all, its role was auxiliary.

Heavy artillery

The concentration of heavy artillery near Gorlice was impressive. The German 11th Army's artillery consisted of 624 guns (466 light and 158 heavy) assigned to a front section of 32.3 kilometres (20 mi), i.e. almost 20 artillery pieces per kilometre. No less importantly, the gunners had all the necessary munition at their disposal. The 11th Army staff ordered to

⁶ A. Arz, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges 1914–1918*, Wien–Leipzig–München 1924, pp. 59–60.

⁷ BA-MA, PH 5 II/303, Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der 11. Armee.

⁸ Cf. *Gorlickaja operacija*, map 2a.

⁹ BA-MA, PH 5 II/303, Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der 11. Armee.

amass 1,000 shells per field guns battery (1,200 in the case of light pieces), 800 per howitzer battery and 500 per mortar battery.¹⁰ The Russian artillery was not only inferior in numbers (675 guns and howitzers, only 3 of them heavy), but had a very limited supply of ammunition. Before Mackensen's offensive, it was allowed only to use 8 shells per gun daily.¹¹

The Austro-Hungarian 3rd and 4th Armies supported the advance on the right and the left flank. They had 144 and 453 guns respectively.¹² These numbers were sufficed bombard the most important Russian strong-points and to neutralise its defenders.

The deployment of the reserves

The German 11th Army consisted of five corps, four of which were deployed in the first line, and the fifth was in reserve. Reinforcements constituted roughly 20 per cent of the attacking forces and were massed behind both wings of Mackensen's army. Also the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army had its reserves – the Szende Brigade – behind its right flank, so it could be used to support the neighbouring Guards Corps.

Mackensen deployed his reserves on 5 May (20th ID less one infantry regiment, already engaged on 3 May¹³) and during the following afternoon

¹⁰ 11. Armeeoberkommando, Besondere Anordnungen nr 8 (28 April 1915), [in:] L. Riedl, *Die Gefechtstätigkeit des k.u.k. VI Korps in der Durchbruchschlacht bei Gorlice*, Budapest 1928, p. 115.

¹¹ B. V. Gerua, *Vospominanija o moej zhizni*, vol. 2, p. 74; *Istorija pervoj mirovoj vojny 1914–1918 gg.*, vol. 2, Moskva 1975, p. 30.

¹² O. T. von Kalm, *Gorlice*, attachment 2.

¹³ The division entered into battle on the right wing of the 11th Army with the task of crossing the Wisłoka River (see BA-MA, PH 8 I/406, Abschrift des Kriegstagebuches der 20. Infanterie-Division 30.4.–30.6.1915; J. Centek, *Działania pruskiej 119. Dywizji Piechoty w dniach 2 i 3 maja 1915 r.*, [in:] *Bitwa pod Gorlicami. Studia z perspektywy stulecia*, ed. J. Centek, S. Kułacz, K. Ruszała, p. 95).

(19th ID¹⁴) as complete units.¹⁵ That it so say, the reserves helped to exploit the success and to transform the tactical victory into an operational one.

Apart from central reserves, each level of the German and Austro-Hungarian command held back some units. For instance, on 2 May, 1915 the Guards Corps sent three of its four brigades into battle. The other one was ordered to cover the left flank of the Corps, and at the same time, the whole 11th Army. The brigades thrown into battle had at least a battalion in the rear.¹⁶ Similarly, the VI Corps had 16 infantry battalions on the first line, further 8 as divisional reserves and 4 as corps reserve, all of which were billeted at a reasonable distance.¹⁷

The German and Austrian use of reserves outlined here contrasts sharply with the Russian policy. Their various levels reinforcements were thrown into battle as small units and without a general plan. The only larger reserve, the 3rd Caucasian Corps, which could have at least delay the advance of German 11th Army had it been deployed in good defensive positions, was used offensively instead. Together with the remnants of 10th Army Corps and the Volodchenko Group, it tried to counterattack a much stronger enemy.¹⁸ This action inflicted heavy losses on both sides and reduced the potential of the Caucasian troops.¹⁹

¹⁴ The division took over the cover of the left flank of the Guards Corps and the German 11th Army. Its task was to close the gap there and to reestablish the connection with the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army (see *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, Vol. 7, Berlin 1931, p. 405; J. Centek, *Korpus Gwardii w bitwie pod Gorlicami*, Warszawa 2015, p. 124).

¹⁵ With the exception for their artillery, which had been used earlier.

¹⁶ See Kalm, *Gorlice*, map 3.

¹⁷ L. Riedl, *Die Gefechtsstätigkeit*, p. 115.

¹⁸ General Radko Dimitriev underestimated attackers' strength. During the assault on 2nd May, he informed the 10th Corps' commander that he had about 2–3 divisions against him. ("Sherzhiny. Komandiru 10-go Korpusa", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 123, p. 100.)

¹⁹ Orders for attack see: "Holm. Konsk, Tarnov, Sluch, Sambor. Komandiram 8, 9, 10, 12, 21, 24 3-go Kavkazsogo korpusov, generalu Volodchenko. Operativnyj prikaz", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 178, p. 123; "Prikaz po gruppe generala ot artillerii

Such decisions lead to substantial losses and the demoralisation of many units. Just in five days, most of the Russian troops engaged in the battle were almost literally destroyed. For example, the remnants of Russian 31st ID (which was engaged on 2 May 1915 with Austro-Hungarian 6th Corps and the far right wing of the Prussian Guards) consisted only of about 1,500 men, although it was reinforced by two infantry regiments during the battle. Since the division's ranks at the beginning of the operations had been about 70 per cent full, the unit dwindled from approximately 15,000 to 1,500 men. In other words, it sustained casualties at the rate of 90 per cent. Despite that, the Russians still kept the division on the first line.²⁰

The morale factor

The Russian 3rd Army was not a monolith; there were significant differences between its units. The Central Powers' offensive mostly hit the Russian 10th Army Corps, which had been previously engaged in the Carpathian Mountains and had sustained notable losses. In May 1915, its division had approximately 70 per cent strength. The worst performance on 2 May was that of the Russian 70th ID. The Prussian 1st Guards Division smashed its left wing, broke a gap between the Russian 9th and 10th Army Corps and allowed the neighbouring 2nd Guards Division to capture the heavily defended village of Staszkówka.²¹

The 70th ID broke down probably because it was a so-called reserve division, formed during the mobilisation and its soldiers were surely not

Irmanova", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 181, p. 124; "Prikaz 31-Pehotnoj Divizii", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 187, p. 130.

²⁰ "Komandiru 3-go Kavkazskogo Korpusa", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 219, p. 145.

²¹ BA-MA, 'Abschrift des Kriegstagebuches des Gardekorps 16.4 Bis 30.6.1915', n.d., PH 6 I/226; 'Abschrift des BA-MA, Kriegstagebuches Der 1. Garde-Infanterie-Division 1.5 Bis 30.6.1915', n.d., PH 8/449, BA-MA, 'Abschrift des Kriegstagebuches Der 2. Garde-Infanterie-Division 2.5.–30.6.1915', n.d., PH 8/I431.

the best. Even the weak Austro-Hungarian 106th Landsturm ID managed to beat its elements.²²

Lack of initiative and cooperation; faulty chain of command

One of the most important factors determining the combat value of a unit is its commanders' initiative. This feature may also apply to particular parts of the chain of command. In the case of the Russian 3rd Army, they were generally passive. Despite various measures undertaken by the arriving Germans – like wearing Austro-Hungarian caps while on reconnaissance to avoid recognition (the infamous *Pickelhaube* would be noticed at once), the Russians had not only discovered the fact that fresh troops arrived in the area, but also managed to establish their identity. Boris Gerua, the Russian 31 ID's chief of staff, stated in his memoirs that soldiers had captured a German officer carrying a map with German and Austro-Hungarian batteries drawn on it.²³ Even if the story is untrue,²⁴ the divisional commander stated that the Austro-Hungarian 39th Honved ID left the trenches and new forces took its place as early as 27 April.²⁵ A day later, the Russian 3rd Army's chief of Staff informed the corps commanders about skirmishes with German patrols.²⁶

Despite the fact that there were still a few days till the beginning of the offensive, the Russians did not do anything more serious to prepare themselves for the upcoming blow. Not only did they fail to organize more

²² T. Woźny, 'Działania 4. Armii austro-węgierskiej w czasie bitwy gorlickiej (2–8 Maja 1915 R.)', [in:] *Front Wschodni I wojny światowej. Studia z dziejów militarnych i polityczno-społecznych*, ed. M. Baczkowski, K. Ruszała, Kraków 2013, p. 64f.

²³ B. V. Gerua, *Vospominanija o moej zhizni*, vol. 2, p. 75.

²⁴ German publications and relevant war diaries (*Kriegstagebuch*) of corps and divisions seem do not mention such an incident.

²⁵ "Prikaz 31-j Pehotnoj Divizii No. 131", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 49, p. 56f.

²⁶ BA-MA, PH 6 I/226, Abschrift des Kriegstagebuches des Gardekorpas 16.4 bis 30.6.1915; "Komandiram 9, 10, 12, 21, 24, 29-go i Konnego korpusov", [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 51, p. 59.

strategic reserves, but even did not move the existing one – the 3rd Caucasian Army Corps – closer to the frontline.

A careful analysis of the volume of documents concerning the battle of Gorlice published in 1941 allows us to understand how the Russian commanders at various levels contributed to this major defeat. Since the beginning of the operation, they sent overoptimistic reports, which informed about fierce fighting but also about some successful counterattacks.²⁷ Such news surely made the understanding of the actual course of events more difficult for the Russian 3rd Army headquarters, but any evidence of serious attempts to change this situation during the battle is hard to find.

Even when the disaster was complete – on 6 May 1915 – General Radko Dimitriev desperately tried to find any reserves for his exhausted troops and to throw them into battle. He stated that there are 2,000 soldiers in the 10th Corps' sector who were preparing fortifications on the rear and that it would be more advantageous to send them to the first line.²⁸

The above observations seem to apply to lower grade commanders as well. They were unable to relieve any of the hard-pressed troops and to contribute to slowing or stopping the enemy's advance.

Such a passive attitude was surely not the case on the Central Powers' side. For example, on 2 May, the Austro-Hungarian 12th ID was not only able to push forward, but also to help its neighbours: the Austro-Hungarian 39th Honved ID on its left and the Prussian 81th Reserve ID from the 41st Reserve Corps on its right.²⁹ The left wing of the Prussian Guards Corps cooperated with Austro-Hungarian 9th Corps in capturing Russian defences in its sectors.³⁰ It is worth emphasizing that in the latter case, the units cooperated beyond corps and army boundaries (i.e. at the junction of the German 11th and Austro-Hungarian 4th Army).

²⁷ “Holm. Nachalniku shtaba glavnokomandujushhego”, [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 121, p. 99; “Komandujushhemu 3-j Armej”, [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 143, p. 106.

²⁸ “Komandiru 10-go Korpusa”, [in:] *Gorlickaja operacija*, doc. 294, p. 177.

²⁹ L. Riedl, *Die Gefechtstätigkeit...*, p. 26–32.

³⁰ ÖStA/KA, Ms.-Wk.R/30 1915; Th. Uriel, *Die Operationen der 3. und 4. Armee bei Gorlice-Tarnów v. 2.5–3.6.1915. Auf Grund der Feldakten*, p. 46; J. Centek, *Korpus Gwardii*, p. 73.

Coalition warfare

The German and Austro-Hungarian forces which were to break through enemy's positions were united under German general August von Mackensen who was appointed commander of the German 11th Army. But this unit was not purely German – one of its corps was Austro-Hungarian. Mackensen was at the same time head of an Army Group which consisted of his and the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army. The Austro-Hungarian commander-in-chief, Archduke Friedrich, was Mackensen's superior, formally at least. The Central Powers managed to overcome problems of coalitional warfare and to create a capable unit with mixed, German and Austro-Hungarian, composition. One may safely assume that sharing the same language served the allies well in this matter.³¹

The Anglo-French coalition warfare was markedly inferior that of the Central Powers demonstrated in Galicia. During the great battle of the Somme, for instance, the British and French forces seemed to conduct separate operations. Their level of cooperation in coalition warfare clearly could not match that of Mackensen's Army Group.

Let us now briefly compare the most important of the circumstances discussed above with those of the Western Front, as this seems to offer a more insightful conclusion.

Summation and comparison with the Western Front

One of the most important factors in every military conflict is operational mobility. On the Western Front, both sides were able to send reinforcements into battle relatively quickly thanks to the dense net of railway lines. In most cases, this enabled them to check the momentum of the enemy's offensive. Such an action was impossible in Galicia due to the scarcity of railway lines, paved roads and, especially in the western part, the hilly terrain.

³¹ O. T. von Kalm, *Gorlice*, p. 16f; *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914–1918*, vol. 2: *Das Kriegsjahr 1915*, Wien 1931, p. 316.

The Russians were also significantly inferior in artillery, especially heavy, while in France either side had enough batteries to inflict heavy losses on the enemy. This inferiority was not only caused by a smaller number of pieces, but also by the lack of ammunition which decreased the strength of available batteries. This important factor is often omitted in comparisons of various armies.

The Russian positions at Gorlice were not designed to withstand heavy bombardment. The Germans, on the other hand, built formidable trenches and shelters which, despite the enormous ammunition use by the Allies on the Somme front, for instance, saved many soldiers' lives. Since the artillery activity was much higher on the Western Front, the soldiers were simply more used to it and their morale did not collapse so quickly when they were exposed to heavy shelling.³²

Summing up, the sophisticated tactics of that time and careful planning would have probably not been enough to ensure such an operational success.³³ It was only possible later in the war, thanks to the introduction of the shock troops and their infiltration tactics. Therefore, the Central Powers owed their success at Gorlice mostly to Russian deficiencies rather than their own advantages.

³² In his memoirs, General Karl von Einem, the commander the 3rd Army on the Western Front, characterized the units which had previously fought on the Eastern Front as not used to the conditions of the warfare in France and unable to bear a massive artillery shelling (cf. Karl von Einem, *Ein Armeeführer erlebt den Weltkrieg*, Leipzig 1938, p. 362 and 375).

³³ During the battles of Vailly and Soupir in October and November 1914, and in the battle of Soissons in January 1915, the German 3rd Corps (Hans von Seeckt was its chief of staff) was able to achieve tactical successes, but it was far from breaking the enemy's frontline.