Strategic Moves of the War, September 21st 1915

Capt. Matthew E. Hanna, Recently of the General Staff, U. S. A.

OF all the great battles waged in the eastern theater of war during the past five months, perhaps none has been so full of possibilities as that being fought to the south of Vilna as these notes are written. The Austro-Germans are making another audacious attempt to split the Russian army in twain, and in doing so they appear to be taking desperate chances that they themselves will suffer a disastrous reverse. They are playing for a high stake, and if the reports reaching us are correct, they are playing with an abandon and disregard for a possible Russian counter-offensive unlike anything we have noted in their operations prior to this battle. The situation recalls the last desperate attempt of the Germans before Paris to crown the opening campaign of the war with a decisive victory, only to be defeated by the French in the great battle of the Marne and thrown back to the line they still occupy. We have yet to see whether a similar reverse is to overtake them in the east.

In the stirring events of more than a month preceding and following the capture of Warsaw and the Polish salient, we had become so accustomed to reading each day of new German conquests that the comparative quiet of the past few weeks was becoming tedious, and on all sides we heard prophets saying that approaching winter, German exhaustion, longer lines of communication and renewed Russian strength had brought major operations to an end for this year in this theater. And now the storm breaks with increased violence at an unexpected point, apparently illustrating once more the completeness with which the German General Staff makes its preliminary arrangements for each successive move. If we were forced to express an opinion on the probable outcome of the battle now raging, we would base our conclusions on the past performances of the Germans, and say they probably did not undertake this last drive until they were quite certain they could see it through to a successful termination. This has been characteristic of each move of the Teuton armies from the beginning of the eastern campaign in the opening days of May.

The desperate fighting which followed the capture of Warsaw and lasted throughout the month of August finally subsided as the Russian line was withdrawn from Poland and established with one flank on the Gulf of Riga and the other on the Rumanian frontier. Fighting continued, to be sure, but it was of minor importance although accompanied by further important advances by the Austro-Germans, intended no doubt to prepare the way for the great battle now being fought. The time consumed in rearranging and resupplying the Teuton armies was greatly increased because of the unfavorable railroad conditions. Not only were the railroads much fewer in numbers as compared with the roads nearer the German frontier, but they also had to be rebuilt. The labor thrown on the communication troops of the German armies must have been stupendous, and when all the conditions are known we probably will be amazed that one German blow could follow another with such rapidity.

Distances are so great in Russia that a mere casual glance at the map does not reveal the true railroad conditions, but a closer study of the small scale map accompanying these notes shows some astonishing facts. Consider the triangle formed by Vilna, Minsk and Baranovitch. It is approximately one hundred miles on a side and contains but one intersecting railroad. Compare this with the network of railroads in the state of Connecticut which is but one hundred miles long and fifty miles wide. Or consider the larger area bounded by the railroads joining Baranovitch, Minsk, Bialystok and Pinsk, two hundred miles long by one hundred miles wide at the extreme points, and containing an area of more than 10,000 square miles without a single railroad. Imagine one fourth of the state of Ohio without railroad communications. Block out ten thousand square miles on any railroad map of the United States, note the network of rails in the area outlined, and some conception may be had of the scarcity of rail communications in the part of Russia where fighting is now taking place. Railroads were of prime importance to the comparatively small armies and light ordnance of a generation or so ago, but for an army numbering millions and equipped with the mammoth artillery of today they may be the deciding factor in a campaign.

The Germans probably planned the Vilna campaign some weeks ago. Earlier in the campaign it was possible for them to shift large numbers of troops in a very few days and take advantage of favorable developments at some point of the long battle front, but that can no longer be done. As we review the events of the

past three weeks it appears that the Germans have gradually created the opportunity for the Vilna drive. All information points to their having selected the northern wing of the Russian army as the target for their next great offensive move. The success the Russians have had south of the great marsh region indicates that the Germans weakened their forces here to increase their strength in the north. For about two weeks they carried on a vigorous offensive against the Russian lines along the Dvina river from Riga to Dvinsk, the effect of which probably was to draw strong Russian reserves to this region. In the meantime they apparently have encouraged the Russian force in Vilna to hold on to that town while they were bending their lines about the city to the east and the west and forming the bag in which they hoped to catch a large part of the Russian army.

Then the real object of the campaign suddenly became apparent. From three directions they began a powerful drive at the force defending Vilna. The railroad from Vilna to Dvinsk was cut and one avenue for the escape from Vilna was closed. The German cavalry, concentrated in advance for this opportunity, was then pushed ahead and in a few days it had possession of Vileika on the railway from Lida to Polotsk. This left but two rail lines of retreat for the Russians about

the beginning of a decisive outcome for the great Russian campaign. Even partial success should be accompanied by material advantages. Between Vilna and the great marshes there probably are at least a quarter of a million Russians, who may be caught in the German net that is sweeping around them. Great as would be the disaster to Russia if even a fraction of this number of men together with the large amount of artillery accompanying the force should be captured, still it would be of but minor importance when compared with the still greater disaster if by chance the German victory should result in splitting the Russian army in twain—the first decisive step towards the total destruction of Russia's armed forces in the field. Once more the Germans appear to be on the verge of doing this. It remains to be seen whether the new leader of the Russian armies is as skillful as his predecessor in eluding the traps set for him by the German leaders.

At the worst, German success in this battle should leave them in possession of the Vilna-Lida-Baranovitch railroad and in position to secure the extension of this line to Rovno. This would be of very great value in the further prosecution of the campaign. What has already been said of the railroad conditions will help to make this clear. With this road in their possession the Germans would have a line parallel to their rear from near Dvinsk to Rovno, a distance of nearly four hundred miles, along which troops could be speedily moved from one portion of the line to the other, and supplies coming on railroads from the west could be distributed. This advantage becomes more pronounced when the disadvantageous railroad situation of the Russians is considered. Before they could have a similar transverse line in their rear they would have to fall back a distance of over two hundred miles to a line running through Dvinsk, Smolensk, Mohilev and Bialystok. Should they remain in front of the Germans on the Dvinsk-Vilna-Baranovitch-Rovno line their supplies on this four hundred mile front would reach them over six railroads with an average distance between railheads of nearly seventy miles.

Should the Germans eventually succeed in capturing Dvinsk and the railroad to Riga, their advantage would be still greater. With winter coming on the necessity becomes greater for looking ahead and planning for a different type of campaign during the extremely cold weather. Should the Germans decide to entrench as in the west, this line of rails in the rear of their trenches will be an asset almost beyond value. Its worth in terms of men and guns cannot be estimated, but it will surely enable the Germans to hold this line with greatly reduced numbers, thus freeing considerable forces for other theaters.

Judging by the rumors that come to us from the Balkans, the Teutons will need in this region all the men they can draw from other fronts. In a Berlin official report the statement was made during the week that German artillery was being employed along the Danube frontier of Serbia. At the same time, Bulgaria has been actively mobilizing her loyal sons from Macedonia. The long predicted march overland through Serbia to Bulgaria and the relief of the Turk seems more imminent than ever before. With Bulgaria and the Teutons allied against Serbia, Rumania and Greece, together with British and Italian troops sent into this theater, a winter campaign of no small magnitude may be fought out in this warmer southern region.

The opening event of such a campaign would be to secure a crossing over the Danube river which forms the greater part of the northern frontier between Serbia and Austria, and the artillery action of the past few days along a considerable part of this frontier probably was for the purpose of preparing the way for the crossing by the German and Austrian infantry. The most direct route to Bulgaria would be across the northeastern portion of Serbia, which is scarcely thirty miles wide, but it is not probable that this route would be used since it lies near the Rumanian frontier, passes through a mountainous region and is not traversed by a railroad.

The most probable line of advance is along the Morava river, which empties into the Danube below Belgrade after passing entirely across Serbia through the city of Nish. The Orient railway follows along the valley of this river through Sofia and Adrianople to Constantinople, and the main purpose of the campaign is to open up this rail route to Turkey. It is one hundred and fifty miles from the Danube to the point where this railroad crosses the frontier between Serbia and Bulgaria, and this represents the minimum distance over which the invaders must advance before they can send ammunition to the struggling Turk.

Battle line in the East on September 21st

Vilna—via Minsk and Baranovitch. As these notes are written the German cavalry is pushing on to Molo-dechno and Minsk to close one of these lines, and the German troops west of Baranovitch are making violent efforts to reach and close the other line at that town. Should the Germans succeed at both these points no lines of retreat would be left the Russians other than inferior highways leading towards the marsh region.

Desperate as the Russian position appears to be, relief may come from Russian forces farther to the east. From Polotsk, Smolensk and Bialystok three railroad lines run to the rear of the Germans who have penetrated to Vileika and beyond, and we may be sure the Russians are exerting every effort to strike the Germans a decisive blow on this dangerously exposed portion of his line. If the Russians are strong and quick enough to do this, the final outcome of the battle might be to their decisive advantage.

Complete German success in this battle might mark