



Santa Barbara, CA:
Praeger/ABC-CLIO,
2010

215 pages

\$44.95

Breakthrough: The Gorlice-Tarnow Campaign, 1915

by Richard L. DiNardo

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This book is at least the fourth on the relatively ignored Eastern Front of World War I to appear within two years. It forms part of the publisher's War, Technology, and History series, whose editor highlights the series' aim to a wide readership and its emphasis on the link between technology and doctrine. DiNardo's work on the Gorlice-Tarnow offensive delivers a concise discussion of the

strategic, operational, and tactical situations.

The book's first three chapters set the stage well. The author emphasizes some significant aspects of this offensive. First, it was a successful breakthrough following the onset of trench warfare. It restored some mobility, but without a substantive role for cavalry. The campaign marked Germany's first true coalition operation with equal partners since the final wars against Napoleon in 1813-15, the wars of 1866 and 1870-71 being Prussian-dominated. Gorlice-Tarnow was also the accomplishment of a new command team, August von Mackensen as commander and Hans von Seeckt as Chief Staff of the 11th Army.

These assertions warrant further discussion. Frankly, DiNardo's discussion of the controversial subject of German war aims is inadequate and omits the latest analysis prior to his publication. Nonetheless, he describes the challenging development and evolution of the alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary. His dissection, from the highest government circles to the appointment of army commanders and their chiefs of staff, clearly confirms the adage that personalities matter and personal relationships make a difference. The author includes insightful biographical detail, mostly in the endnotes. Not surprisingly, two other prominent figures throughout the campaign are the German and Austro-Hungarian Chiefs of Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn and Conrad von Hötzendorf, respectively.

The strategic imperative, despite a focus on the West and a belief in an impending Anglo-Franco offensive, was the need to eliminate the Russian threat to Austria-Hungary in Galicia and establish a viable line of communications to Turkey by defeating Serbia. This strategic tension even inaugurated a reduction in the Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) of German divisions on the Western Front. While fewer than desired, DiNardo calls the available units "picked troops," veterans of the West under experienced commanders. They received considerable preoperational training. A commendably simple plan incorporated meticulous preparations, limited objectives, and the detailed, nuanced use of artillery. The degree of cooperation between the two allies was a major multiplier as well.

The Gorlice-Tarnow Campaign is a telling case study on the nature of warfare at the time. It consisted of three major operations. The first began with break-in actions to punch a hole in the Russian line on 2 May 1915. Its next phase required major shifts in operational focus. DiNardo cites this phase as the Germans at their most nimble. The troops executed a river crossing of the San and moved on. The anticlimactic capture of the fortress city Przemysl on 3 June was a significant accomplishment, a symbol of permanent change in Central Powers' fortunes on the Eastern Front. Its capture, however, was not sufficient to dissuade Italy from joining the war on the side of the Entente. Romania held back for now.

The triumph at Przemysl initiated a particularly acrimonious analysis of strategic choices among the Germans and Austrians. Falkenhayn's solution to Italy's declaration of war on Austria-Hungary alone on 23 May was to buy off the Italians with territorial concessions. Conrad's retort was for Germany to do the same by ceding Alsace and Lorraine to France.

The second major operation strove for the capture of Lemberg. The main attack began on the night of 12-13 June; Lemberg was German by 22 June. The German 11th Army and three Austro-Hungarian armies had advanced 186 miles since 2 May. They had now liberated Galicia.

The third major operation, launched on 15 July, advanced north vice east, into Russian Poland. The Germans delivered another serious reverse by the end of August. Ironically, this third major tactical and operational victory did not knock Russia out of the war; indeed, large Russian forces escaped. The operation also revealed a new, strategic shortfall. The Germans and Austrians had no occupation policy, beginning with an elementary concept on how to stage the entrance into Warsaw.

The Gorlice-Tarnow Campaign clearly showed German troops at their best. DiNardo specifically cites their adept use of aerial reconnaissance, heavy artillery, and technical communications like telegraph and telephone. Realistic plans balanced operational objectives with critical operational pauses. Following initial breakthroughs, German units received deep objectives, but without cross-boundary coordination issues, while the Russians lacked sufficient opportunity to recover. This recipe for success highlighted major disagreements between OHL (the German High Command) and the German headquarters on the Eastern Front, *Ober Ost*. Additionally, both victory and defeat still bore serious losses. Mackensen's Galician operation alone cost 87,000 casualties. The year 1915 cost Austria-Hungary and Russia total losses on all fronts of 2,100,000 and 2,386,000 respectively.

DiNardo's style has presented a digestible and focused case study for the readers; a few editing slips are of little consequence. He articulates the daunting challenges facing the German high command in a war with unforeseen conditions and duration. Gorlice-Tarnow was far from a preordained success. His narrative is especially insightful to demonstrate the delicate balancing of strategic choices, especially in the context of alliance warfare.