

Tactical Notes: LA GRANDE ARMÉE

by Richard Berg

The life expectancy of a wargame is remarkably short. In this era of proliferation it is not unusual to see a new game greeted with hosannas, played to exhaustion as if it were the Rosetta Stone of Life, then abandoned to the dusty shelf of boredom all within an eight to ten month period. It is the rare game that can remain at a peak of popularity for more than a year, and *La Grande Armée*, a brilliant evocation of the power and glory of the Napoleonic army at its peak, is one of those *rara aves*. Since its publication in 1972, LGA has been a consistently popular game and it remains even more so today, residing loftily at the peak of SPI's Pre-WWII ratings.

The reasons for the success of *LGA* are, generally, threefold: Firstly, the game is remarkably clear and clean. There are virtually no "loopholes" in the rules and little, if any, errata of importance. The result is a simulation with exceptionally high playability, a simulation where the Player can concentrate on the nuances of the system, rather than the enigma of the language. Secondly, the game has a strong sense of history; however, this is a historicity which does not overly complicate or obfuscate the basic playability. Now, this is not to say that all games of the 1805 Scenario, for example, end with a pitched battle around Austerlitz. Rather, it is a sense of the era, a feel for the strategies and pressures of the day that convey an accuracy rarely matched by other games of this period.

And lastly, the three games included in *LGA* [for those who are unaware, *LGA* consists of three separate games - the campaigns of 1805, 1806 and 1809] each offer a strong challenge to Players on both sides. Seemingly unreachable objectives must be gained with utmost speed, yet the ability to move rapidly must be tempered by a readiness to concentrate for a major blow. The problems inherent in this speed versus power confrontation are what help to create the intriguing situations that occur.

However, there seems to be a general trend to consider the 1805 Scenario as woefully unbalanced and unworthy of the "True Challenge". This belief is, for the host of uninitiates, most fortuitously untrue. Despite the fact that the Austrians and their Russian allies are constantly beleaguered by overwhelming troop strengths imbued with superior speed and organization, it is indeed a top French commander (as was Napoleon

in his prime) who can deliver more than a marginal victory. I have personally witnessed two Austrian Decisive Victories over competent French commanders, as wildly improbable as that may seem! Thus, whereas 1809 may be a more balanced scenario in the mathematical sense, it is the 1805 game that offers the greatest challenge.

There are essentially two ways to approach Victory Conditions in *LGA*. You can judge a victory from a purely mathematical viewpoint, or you can measure from your success against history - here Napoleon's smashing campaign culminating in Austerlitz. Either way, it is a surprisingly difficult haul for the French, for while the Austro-Russian alliance may have little in the way of military ability, it does have a strong ally in the clock.

Father Time is no "paper ally" in that he is simply a mechanism for ending the game, an outer limit within which the player must perform as if the world were going to explode after Turn 12. (The 1806 scenario has a bit of that pseudo-doomsday flavor.) Here, the French are fighting for time against the ever-hesitant Prussians, who are lurking indecisively across the mountains. If Napoleon does not move quickly and decisively, the entrance of the Prussian army, especially in the later stages of the game, is sure to seal his doom - at least in the victory point column.

1805 is essentially a three-stage game: There is an initial two-turn period where the Austrians have a virtually free reign over the board (the French have only 3 leaderless divisions); then the French arrive en masse and begin the game proper, attempting to make huge gains while eliminating as many of the Allies as possible; and, finally, there is the endgame, with the French attempting to take both Prague and Vienna (unless they already have done so) to achieve a satisfactory level of victory. For both players it is the middle period that will prove decisive.

OPENING, Turns 1-2:

For the Austrians the first 2 turns appear to be turns of opportunity; in reality, they are fraught with danger. Few are the players who will make the historical mistake of trying to occupy Ulm. While it may seem to be a good way to delay the unrushing French in Turn Three, it is virtually unreachable by the poorly trained Austrians and easily defendable by any one of the three French garrison divisions. It is also a good way to lose the Austrian Army, and the game, quite easily. No, the best bet is for the Austrians to place

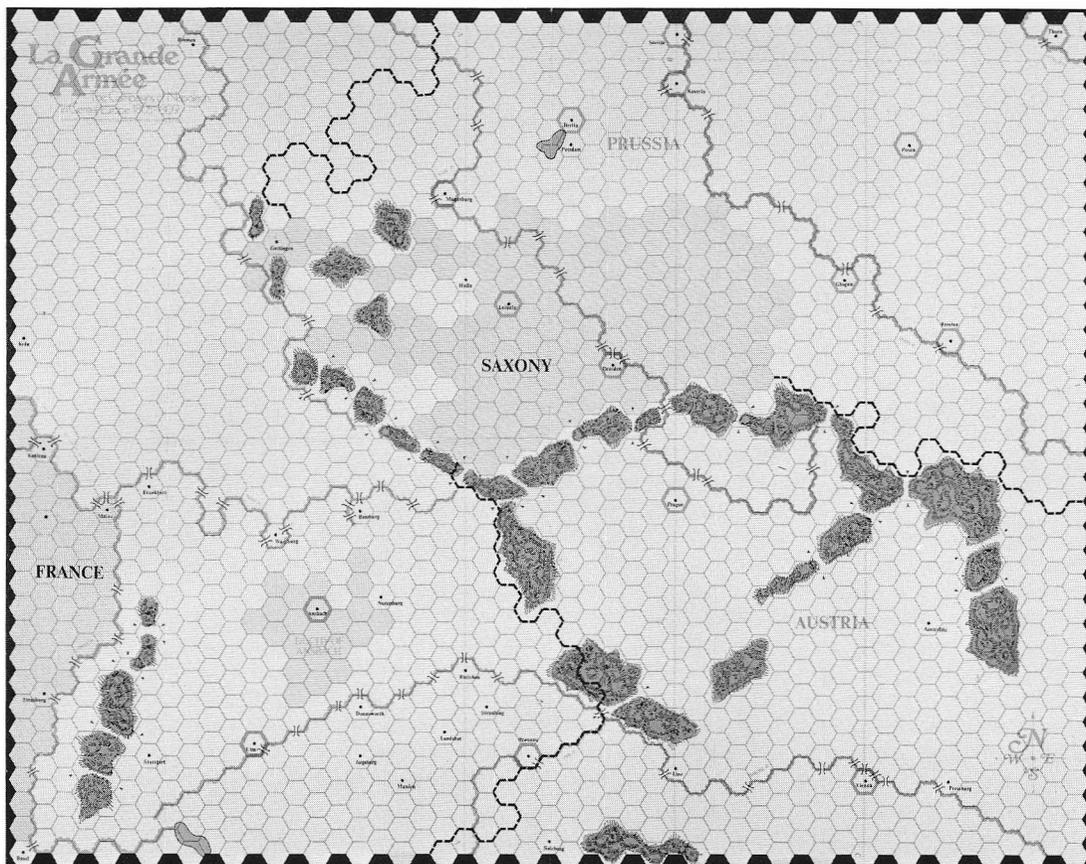
their troops in such positions as can be readily moved from to cover possible French approaches. Again, this is best done by placing them somewhat to the west of the "Franco-Austrian" border; not so far west as to get caught by the French in Late September - Early October, but far enough so that those seemingly innocuous French divisions can't keep them bottled up in Austria proper.

Keep your cavalry available to screen any overt move by the three French divisions, while positioning them so as to be able to react to the French advance in Turn Three. It may be, and should be, worth the effort to put an Austrian infantry corps in Branau, preferably with Schwarzenburg for aid and succor. That should slow the French, as possession of Branau is a key to victory. In order to take it (excluding the possibility of a low-odds gamble), Napoleon will need at least 48 combat points, and that only gives him a 2-1 chance of success.

The French can do little the first two turns, yet they can accomplish much. If the Austrians do not make a move towards Branau, they can always risk a forced march to grab it while empty. Usually, however, the Austrian is bright enough at least to seize this minimal opportunity. Conversely, Ulm shouldn't be too hard to cover if the Allied Player is foolhardy enough to try that. Most of the time, the Austrian will simply hedge his position, trying to sit on a strategic fence in an attempt to be ready for any of Napoleon's thrusts. Here is where those three lone divisions can come in handy, e.g., if the Austrian seeks to take a central position in anticipation of any possible French attack, considerable pressure can be brought on the Northern pass(es) west of Prague. It is not necessary to attack; the presence of French troops alone will serve to keep the Austrians bottled up and might even cause him to commit too soon. Don't idle away the first two turns - put those three units to work. Remember, they should have no trouble outrunning the lumbering Austrians.

MIDDLE GAME, Turns 3-8:

This is where the game is won or lost. For here, where the action is freewheeling and objectives hazy, mistakes can be greatly magnified and huge advantages seized. One of the key lessons of *LGA* is that passing up opportunities can be immediately fatal. This is truly a game of calculated risk, and the cautious player is usually a sorry player - in more ways than one.



On Turn Three, after the Austrians have had a month in which to maneuver and await oncoming Russian reinforcements, virtually the entire French Army arrives as if shot from a cannon. Unrestricted infantry triple-forced-march is allowed, and woe betide the French player who does not exploit this to the fullest. All French infantry should be left as divisions and marched the full 15 hexes (if possible) towards the Austrian border. Remember, units that are stacked as arriving reinforcements must pay unstacking costs, so it may be best to spread your army out over a wide area, or what amounts to virtually half the board. This is not as much of a drawback as it may seem; the Austrians won't be so stupid as to try to take you piecemeal (he can't do it anyway), and your infantry divisions should still be within good concentration range of each other. In any case, your cavalry brigades should be out front as screens.

This maneuver should place the bulk of the French Army just west of the Bamberg-Augsburg line. The Allied Player may possibly have cavalry screens of his own near Bamberg and Donauworth to halt any further speed on the part of the French (remember the Ansbach provision!). The chances of this, however, are slim, as the Austrians will usually not want to endanger the three cavalry units he has. Turn Four will usually be a concentration turn. The French should spend this time preparing for their first major onslaught by risking only minimal forced marches (the French should rarely, if ever, waste a supply unit on forced march) and building an effective striking force that

will not need forced marches for maximum combat effectiveness the following turn. Several divisions can be brought forward to secure key staging positions.

There are three points of attack for the French, and that is why the diffuse approach is best; it enables the French to arrive quickly without giving away their intentions, yet still permits them to concentrate effectively on almost any point. North of the Danube there are the two major entrance passes, the central one being the most accessible in terms of troop movements. However, the central pass is usually easily screened by cavalry, and infantry maneuver, especially defensive maneuver, is quite easy there. The best bet is the northern pass, which is usually left guarded by a corps and leader (supplies). To do more would be to strip all other areas (remember, there is most likely a corps in Branau). The French should, at this juncture, attack frontally from the pass entrance hex *and* the NW mountain hex while forced marching an infantry division through the mountains to cut off retreat through the eastern pass-entrance hex. This, in most cases, will effectively open the entire north of Austria to whatever forces are in the area, while French cavalry seal off any possible countermeasures through the center. Several infantry divisions can also be detached to the center to pin whatever Austrian forces are present while presenting a sticky problem for the oncoming Russians.

In the meantime, the Southern French forces (it is oftentimes hard to cross the Danube, so it is wiser to split forces for now) should be

attacking Branau, unless it has been abandoned. There should be sufficient strength on hand to muster an army-sized 18-2 which, along with a few other divisions plus Napoleon, should provide the needed minimal 200% superiority. Branau must be taken, and taken by Turn Six at the latest. If Turn Six is the attack turn for Branau, all available cavalry and several infantry divisions should be sent quickly on ahead to cross the 'B' line and seize Linz, if possible. If Branau has been abandoned, proceed with all towards Linz; the faster you approach Vienna, the better. If the Austrian Player is adept at deploying his cavalry, this may be difficult. However, attacks on those units should be sufficient to force them to retreat before combat, forcing the way open for next turn.

Up North, the French should have the Allies forced into a serious situation. There is virtually no defensible terrain in the vicinity of Prague, and the French can literally run rings around the Allies. The Allied Player will most likely concentrate on attempting to block the passes SE of Linz and east of Prague in an effort to keep the French away from Vienna, at least until the Ninth Turn. Here again is where the French must move quickly and boldly. Prague will most likely have to be besieged, as the forces necessary to take it will not be readily available (unless the Allied Player has seen fit to abandon it).

From Turns Six to Eight, if the French Player can get his units across the Inn River in sufficient force and speed and move his cavalry into Austria north of the Danube as a

giant screen, it is possible that a forced march attack from Branau on Vienna can be made, a Vienna which will most likely be relatively unguarded. If this can be accomplished, the campaign is virtually over, as the Allied Player will never have the strength to push the French back. But the French commander must move quickly - if the opportunity is there he cannot let it pass. To do so would be to move the campaign into an endgame where, for the first time, the Austrians are at an advantage. Thus, the French commander must march, attack, move again, and attack - all as fast as possible, without resting to regroup. It is risky, and it is exciting. If Napoleon can "execute", his victory will be great; if he shows any hesitation, he'll have to settle for half a loaf - or perhaps none at all.

For the Allies, the strategy of the Middle game is simple: delay, delay, delay. And, if possible, avoid major troop losses. The Allied commander will have to decide where best to deploy his meager cavalry. Dividing them might be dangerous; they are going to be forced to retreat before combat and should have sufficient reserves to back them up.

From reading the French strategy it is obvious that the Allies' strategy is simply quick reaction. Remember, the French need 50 points to win, and 60 to gain any sort of substantial victory. That means Vienna is a must, especially if the Allies have fair troop strength on the board at the end. If you can somehow succeed in holding the French away from Prague and eastern Austria by Turn Nine, you might find the Prussian Army has become a welcome ally. Above all, remember that all non-beseiged Allied units detract from the French point total - so stay loose.

The Austrian's best weapon is the cavalry screen. While the strength of the Allied corps may be sufficient to cause the French to hesitate momentarily, it is the cavalry that can stop them cold. Therefore, the most judicious use of cavalry should be in the south, where cavalry is more easily exploitable. After using cavalry to ensure that the central pass is not employed as an early staging depot for French troops, the cavalry should then be sent swiftly toward Linz. Here they can be deployed to severely retard the French advance on Vienna. It will not be easy, as those French troops not involved at Prague will most likely try to filter down through the passes north of Linz to help the Southern army. But if you can attain judicious placement for two turns, the French may be slowed sufficiently to save the day. Try to keep the French south of the Danube so that a link will not be effected. The oncoming Buxhowden and the two Russian corps can usually handle the defense of Vienna well enough to prevent any French breakthrough there, if the Austrians have slowed them sufficiently on the previous turns. Try not to retire to Vienna; that could be fatal. Again, use the Russian cavalry brigade as a screen, with the Russian infantry placed well enough so that a French attack is foolhardy. By Turn Nine, there will

be sufficient additional forces to block any but the most concerted French efforts. Strategic delay is of the utmost importance. Simply keep the French from taking advantage of their superior movement skills; time will do the rest.

In the north things are a bit shakier. The northern pass can easily be held, but doing so will open the entire area south of it. The Austrians have only four corps with which to work initially, and arriving reinforcements usually come on in the South, where speed of deployment is easier to attain. Thus, the northern pass should be held with one leadered corps. A supply unit can be placed on the hex immediately to its rear, forestalling any possible cut-off move by the French. If possible, there should be two supply units present, in case the rear supply unit is attacked and destroyed. It may also be possible to use infantry here to screen a quicky entry by French troops, as it is usually difficult, and unnecessary, for the French to bring cavalry in play by way of the northern passes. Again, strategic placement of available units can both deprive the French of their mobility and retain the unit for use another day.

After all has been accomplished that can be done, a retreat into Prague is usually called for by most of the Northern forces. If you can spare two corps and a leader that will be great, as the French will probably not have the time nor the strength to waste on an all-out attack. This will force a siege, which is not really all that wonderful, but it ties up a good deal of the northern French army and gives you a bit more "leg room" in the south. Try, if at all strategically feasible, to block those passes east of Prague. The French have a nasty habit of sending fast-moving cavalry and triple forced marched infantry through there to cut off arriving reinforcements and generally create havoc. You also want, if possible, to stop the French from crossing the 'C' line - at least until Turns Ten or Eleven.

Thus, the Allied Player must cover two, and possibly three, fronts with inferior, lumbering troops. However, the game rules, especially Retreat Before Combat, make this much easier than may initially seem possible. Watch the French commander, he cannot feint forever, and he has got to commit by Turn Five at the latest. If you have placed your meager forces, especially your cavalry, in good positions in the opening phase of the game, you have a good chance (and it is only a chance, not a foolproof strategy) to stymie the French mobility and force him into an endgame, where the momentum switches to the Allies.

ENDGAME, Turns 9-12:

The last few turns of the game present several problems to the French commander if he hasn't made sufficient headway by Turn Nine. Fairly heavy Austrian and Russian reinforcements make flanking maneuvers difficult, and the Allies can use a position defense, knowing full well that the French face a rapidly rising Prussian reinforcement

trigger mechanism. The French have the difficult decision as to whether to keep their troops on the board to enable them to make necessary attacks, or to move them south to get additional victory points, thus weakening their on-board position.

For the French, if they have a good early shot at Vienna, say Turn Nine, or maybe Ten, it is better to keep as much strength on as possible. (Remember, you may have to keep several good units north to maintain a siege of Prague.) Then, if Vienna is taken by Turn Ten, you have two turns in which to march as rapidly as possible towards the largest Allied troop concentrations, eliminating as many as possible. It is a dangerous game, as the Allies can usually run fast enough to keep away for a few turns; but the French have the strength and speed to win what amounts to a race to the wire.

Failing any possibility for a good attack on Vienna, it is best to attempt to besiege the city, bringing most of your troops south. Go after whatever forces the Allies have left and then, on Turns Eleven and Twelve, hightail it south for the victory points. If you get enough units off you may just gain that decisive victory. Of course, if you move too soon with too much, a bold Allied commander might just lift the sieges of Prague and/or Vienna, and all your work has gone for naught.

The problem here is that the rapid marches and quick attacks of the middle game have usually left the French quite spread out, and regrouping can be difficult and costly. If the Allies have sufficient cavalry left, they can disrupt most attempted concentrations and foil any grand plans the French commander might have engendered. Thus, it is imperative that the French perform mightily in the middle game, for failure to gain a position of strength by Turn Nine can easily prove to be fatal.

For the Allies, the endgame is simple: stop the French from taking Vienna and avoid troops losses. If your position at Turn Nine is fairly tenable, arriving reinforcements should allow you to effectively hinder French concentration. If you can do this for several turns, the Prussians will arrive and then you can concentrate entirely on Vienna. If you see the French running for the South, increase the pressure. You may just be able to regain Prague or push the French back over the 'C' line.

If the Allied commander is able to seize any initiative at this time, the game can turn rapidly, and a seemingly sure French victory may swiftly become an Allied surprise.

This is what makes the game such a challenge; that ability to produce the last-second turnaround. The pressure is on the French commander constantly. He cannot relax, he cannot assume. For those who have not tried *La Grande Armee* yet, they are missing a most fascinating simulation, and for those who have dismissed the 1805 scenario as unworthy of their talents, they are in for a disconcerting, but pleasant surprise. ● ●