

The Ludic Science Club Crosses the Berezina

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'The invasion streams eastwards and reaches its final goal – Moscow. ... But, all at once, instead of the *chance* happenings and the *genius* which hitherto had so consistently led ... [Bonaparte] to the predestined goal, an innumerable sequence of reverse *chances* occur – from the cold in his head at Borodino to the frosts and the spark which set Moscow on fire – and, instead of *genius*, folly and baseness without parallel appear. The invaders run, turn back, and run again, and all the *chances* are now not for ... [Bonaparte] but always against him.'¹

On 2nd March, Class Wargames launched the 2014 season of the Ludic Science Club with a participatory performance at Furtherfield Commons in London's Finsbury Park of our hacked version of the 1812 Crossing of the Berezina scenario from Richard Borg's *Commands & Colors: Napoleonics*. A couple of years earlier, we'd successfully adapted this wonderful military simulation to celebrate the world-historical victory of the Haitian Jacobins over the French Bonapartists at the 1802 Battle of Fort Bedourete.² Now, for this event at this celebrated London avant-garde art gallery, we were going to use Borg's game to recreate the only time that Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri de Jomini – the two most influential theorists of Napoleonic warfare – had faced each other in combat. During the 19th century, their writings would come to define rival pedagogies within the military academy. For the admirers of Clausewitz's *On War*, his dialectical philosophy elucidated the political ambitions which were realised through the brutality and chaos of the battlefield. In contrast, Jomini's *The Art of War* taught that the armed struggle was primarily a set of technical skills which defined the professional officer corps. However, in November 1812, these two soldier scholars had yet to publish their canonical texts of military theory. Instead, they were both participants in the final drama of Bonaparte's disastrous attempt to invade Russia. On one side of the Berezina river in Belarus, Clausewitz was serving as a staff officer in the Tsar's army which was in hot pursuit of the heathen defilers of the motherland. On the opposite bank, Jomini was an aide-de-camp to one of Bonaparte's marshals along with the bedraggled remnants of the retreating French army.³ In their famous books, both of them would draw upon this dramatic confrontation to theorise the difficulties of defending river crossings against a determined enemy. On that day in 1812, much to the chagrin of Clausewitz, Jomini and the rest of the Bonaparte's army were able to escape from the encircling Russian forces.⁴ Much to our delight, in the scenario booklet for *Commands & Colors: Napoleonics*, Borg laid down this challenge to the players of his game: 'Can you change history?' Class Wargames was going to investigate whether Clausewitz and the Russians could prevail in the Crossing of Berezina this time around.

1 Leon Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, page 1347. Emphasis in the original.

2 See Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, pages 232–236, 321–322.

3 See Christopher Bassford, 'Jomini and Clausewitz', page 5. Also see Carl von Clausewitz, *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia*, pages 206–212; and Adam Zamoyski, *1812*, pages 458–480.

4 See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, pages 522–540; and Antoine-Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, page 226–232.

As we laid out the wooden blocks and terrain features on the board, I explained the special rules that we'd added to the scenario which came with the Russian expansion set for Borg's game. In the original version, the two armies were compelled to advance towards each other to secure victory. However, we'd decided that it would be much more interesting if the goal of the French army was to escape off one side of the board while the Russians' task was to stop them. Adding to the fun, Clausewitz and Jomini were also added as special pieces which could activate units without needing a command card.⁵ Once the deployment for the Berezina scenario was completed, Richard Parry – with Vagelis Makropoulos as his aide de camp – took on the role of Mikhail Kutuzov directing the Russian army. As their opponents, James Moulding – with Tim Martin as his advisor – became Napoléon Bonaparte leading the French forces. In the opening moves of the game, the Russian team adopted a twin track strategy of advancing on their left flank to cut off the enemy's escape route while their right harassed the invaders' rear guard to slow down their move across the bridge. While fending off these attacks, the French generals focused on getting as many units on their left flank over the Berezina river as quickly as possible. Once the bridge was destroyed, those regiments which failed to make it would be lost and count towards the Russians' tally of victory banners which decided the outcome of the game. When we'd first tried out our remix of the Berezina scenario a week earlier, the Bonapartists had triumphed with ease. However, on this occasion, their contradictory imperatives of holding a defensive line and moving units off the board proved to be fatal. As the Russians advanced over the hill towards the bridge, the retreating French left suffered heavy casualties in the subsequent fire fight. While Jomini, two infantry, one cavalry and one artillery regiments did eventually make it across the Berezina, three units were destroyed before it was blown up. With the Tsarists accumulating victory banners, the Bonapartists tried to counter-attack with their right flank forces. Unfortunately for them, their enemy had a command card which launched a cavalry charge that destroyed the French cuirassier unit in one devastating blow. In their next move, this Russian mobile reserve pounced on the now exposed Imperial Guard regiment which was soon reduced to one block. Luckily for them, the French possessed a command card that enabled this shattered unit to exit off the board. However, this nifty manoeuvre only delayed the inevitable. After a brief exchange of musketry between Clausewitz's and Jomini's infantry regiments, the Tsarists concentrated their firepower against the Bonapartist artillery. Thanks to impressive dice rolls, both batteries were eliminated and the game was won. This time around, the Russians had prevented the invaders' army from escaping across the Berezina river. Bonaparte – the usurper of the 1789 French Revolution – had died a defeated man in Belarus. As Borg had promised, history could be changed on the game board.⁶

In early-21st century England, this desire to rewrite the past is often associated with Tory nostalgists who fantasise about the wrong side winning the decisive battles and political crises which shaped the modern world.⁷ It would have been much better if Charles Stuart had crushed his parliamentary opponents, the slave-

5 This new version of the Berezina scenario for *Commands & Colors: Napoleonics* can be downloaded from the Class Wargames website.

6 For the photos of this game, see the 2014 Events section of the Class Wargames website.

7 For a sceptical view of these conservative fantasies, see Richard Evans, *Altered Pasts*.

owners' rebellion had triumphed in the American Civil War and the KMT had thwarted the Maoist peasant revolution.⁸ As his contribution to these reactionary reveries, Adam Zamoyski has imagined that Bonaparte's victory over the Russians in 1812 would have united Europe into one federal empire and thereby prevented the disastrous wars which devastated the continent during the early-20th century.⁹ Not surprisingly, when we refought the Crossing of Berezina for our Ludic Science Club, Class Wargames had no intention of endorsing this Tory delusion that the crucial role of contingency and choice within political-military conflicts refutes the materialist conception of history, especially in its Marxist variants.¹⁰ On the contrary, our group took its inspiration from the leading theorist of the Situationist International: Guy Debord. Back in 2007, we'd originally set up Class Wargames to promote the playing of this New Left prophet's long-neglected *The Game of War*. During the hard times of the 1970s, having helped to catalyse the May '68 French Revolution, Debord made a tactical retreat to an Auvergne cottage where he spent long hours devising this iconic Horse-and-Musket simulation.¹¹ Yet, for his hagiographers, their hero's enthusiasm for wargames is usually nothing more than a slightly dubious eccentricity which provides quirky titles for their books or exhibitions.¹² Most of them instead concentrate on praising Situationism as the avant-garde art movement which wrote the tactical manual for punk rock, culture jamming and relational aesthetics. Fortunately, the more enlightened also admire Debord for his searing critique of the media-saturated societies of modern capitalism. Participatory creativity was the avant-garde premonition of cybernetic communism.¹³

From the outset, Class Wargames' strategic objective has been to go beyond these artistic and political understandings of Situationism by celebrating Debord's fascination with military history and military theory. Coming from the homeland of the Sex Pistols and Banksy, we began our campaign of ludic subversion by gleefully re-enacting the first avant-garde iteration of the International: issuing fiery Marxist communiques mocking neoliberal orthodoxies, making our film about *The Game of War* with telling clips sampled from other movies, performing in emotionally evocative locations like the Winter Palace in St Petersburg and enabling the players of this Horse-and-Musket simulation to savour a brief moment of participatory creativity.¹⁴ As Pussy Riot's 2012 *Punk Prayer* provocation proved so well, these art tactics can still be stunningly effective against culturally conservative regimes, such as that of Vladimir Putin in Russia.¹⁵ Unfortunately, as the Situationists themselves emphasised, the mass media and the art world in the

8 See John Adamson, 'England Without Cromwell'; Stephen Sears, 'A Confederate Cannae'; and Arthur Waldron, 'China Without Tears'.

9 See Adam Zamoyski, 'Napoleon Triumphs in Russia'.

10 See Niall Ferguson, 'Introduction Virtual History'; and Richard Evans, *Altered Pasts*, pages 47-89.

11 See Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord, *A Game of War*; and Guy Debord, *Panegyric*, pages 33-34.

12 For instance, see Andrew Hussey, *The Art of War*; and Emmanuel Guy and Laurence de Bras, *Guy Debord: un art de la guerre*.

13 Debord's fabulous life has had many chroniclers: Vincent Kaufman, *Guy Debord*; McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*; Len Bracken, *Guy Debord*; Andrew Hussey, *The Art of War*; Andy Merrifield, *Guy Debord*; Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*; and Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*.

14 For this first phase of our campaign of ludic subversion, see Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, pages 28-108.

15 See Pussy Riot, *Punk Prayer*; and David Riff, 'A Representation which is Divorced from the Consciousness'.

West are adept at turning avant-garde weapons against their inventors.¹⁶ Outraging conventional taste, remixing appropriated material, user-generated-content and social networking have long been incorporated as clever business techniques within the information economy. The Sex Pistols are now a heritage icon of English cultural innovation.¹⁷

In response, *Class Wargames* is committed to proclaiming the New Left politics manifested in *The Game of War*. To the casual observer, Debord's simulation looks like a simplified version of an Avalon Hill or SPI recreation of a Napoleonic engagement with its infantry, cavalry and artillery pieces. Yet, for its inventor, *The Game of War* was a ludic lesson in Situationist politics. When Debord had been a rebellious youth in 1950s France, the Left was dominated by the uptight politicians of the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties. Despising these old school operators, many radicals of his generation were attracted by the romantic image of the revolutionary warrior intellectual: Leon Trotsky, Mao Zedong and Che Guevara.¹⁸ In its early years, the Situationist International had mimicked the intensity of a Bolshevik sect with its ideological splits, membership purges and, in Debord, a maximum leader. However, after having witnessed the collective power of the people during May '68, this New Left thinker realised that the elitist style of politics now had to be abandoned. In a smart move, Debord dissolved the International in 1972 to prevent its admirers from coalescing themselves into a Situationist version of the vanguard party.¹⁹ As his next turn, he then published his ludic antidote to the temptations of Bolshevism: *The Game of War*. By adopting a Napoleonic theme, Debord deftly connected the 1917 Russian remix of the modernising revolution with its original 1789 French version. In both countries, the leaders of the oppressed had become the new oppressors.²⁰ Through their republican dictatorship, the Jacobins had anticipated the Bolsheviks' totalitarian rule. Above all, Bonaparte was the prototype for the 20th century's charismatic men in uniform who saved the revolution by destroying it. The Left's greatest enemies were too often drawn from amongst its own ranks.²¹

The Situationists had the hard task of ensuring that the rebels of the May '68 generation didn't make the same mistakes as their illustrious predecessors. Artists, activists and academics can make an important contribution to struggle for human emancipation, but they're only effective when their efforts are closely combined with those of the working class as a whole. Inventing *The Game of War* was Debord's inspired remedy for the New Left's unhealthy fascination with Trotsky, Mao and Che. In Debord's game, the four cavalry pieces symbolise the vanguard units of the insurrectionary army. By engaging in simulated Horse-and-Musket warfare, its players learn that their cavalry regiments – like the Situationist International during May '68 – must be sacrificed when necessary to break through the opponent's defences. On Debord's miniature battlefield, victory over the enemy requires the skilful and combined direction of its infantry, cavalry and artillery units. From this ludic experience, Left militants would come to

16 See Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations', pages 18–20; and Raoul Vaneigem, *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*.

17 See Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, pages 67–68; and Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, pages 79–104.

18 See A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism*; and Christophe Bourseiller, *Les Maoïstes*.

19 See Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *The Veritable Split in the International*.

20 See Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, pages 254–257.

21 See Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, pages 112–229.

understand that vanguard intellectuals are expendable pieces within the class struggle. If everyone can play at being Bonaparte on the game board, then no one will become a new Trotsky, Stalin or Mao in real life.

In the early-21st century, Debord's ludic message hasn't lost any of its relevance. The Soviet Union may be long gone, but the Bolsheviks' elitist politics still haunts the Left. Ironically, amongst the 2011-2 Occupy movements in the USA and Europe, their firm ideological rejection of formal hierarchies empowered a small group of highly networked individuals who coordinated the street protests and on-line activism of the spontaneous multitudes.²² In such circumstances, *The Game of War* becomes not only a history lesson about these revolutionary vanguards, but also a training tool for democratising the skills of political leadership so far monopolised by the few. By moving pieces across the board, its players are engaged in a practical critique of intellectual elitism within the Left. They are understanding that it is their intelligent actions not their ideological fervour that will transform the world. Rejecting the Post-Modernists' obsession with the cultural question, Debord proudly proclaimed that: 'I'm not a philosopher, I'm a strategist!²³ Crucially, in its rules and layout, his Horse-and-Musket simulation was designed as a ludic abstraction of Clausewitz's *On War*. For Lenin and Mao, this classic book of dialectical theory had anticipated the militarisation of the social revolution in Eurasia. The vanguard party was the general staff of the people's uprising.²⁴ Countering this Bolshevik recuperation, the players of *The Game of War* are learning the 5 key tactical and strategic principles of *On War*: coup d'oeil²⁵, psyching the enemy, concentration of forces, outflanking the enemy and hot pursuit. While competing to destroy each other's arsenals, the rival teams are turning Clausewitzian theory into Situationist practice.²⁶ In this way, *The Game of War* is a ludic prophecy of cybernetic communism. When every Red partisan is learning to fight like Bonaparte, the dispersed forces of the Left will be able to unify into the collective skilful general and then prevail over the capitalist enemy on the spectacular battlefield.

Since our foundation in 2007, Class Wargames has championed this seductive vision of ludic subversion. From Belo Horizonte in Brazil to Irkutsk in Russia, we've hosted participatory performances of *The Game of War* and other political-military simulations. Through our publications, films, xenographs and website, we've proselytised for the Left to embrace the Situationist antidote to its sterile theoretical problems and tired ideological disputes. The practical skills of collective leadership are there to be learnt on the game board. When the Ludic Science Club met to play the 1812 Crossing of Berezina, our objective was to continue Debord's emancipatory mission by experimenting with a new détournement of *Commands & Colors: Napoleonics*. Like our 1802 Fort Bedourete scenario, we'd devised this re-enactment as an interactive history lesson in the dramatic course and consequences of this famous battle. Best of all, as well as marking the beginning of the end of Bonaparte's empire, playing the Crossing of the Berezina also contributed to our collective study of Jomini's and Clausewitz's military theories. During that afternoon at Furtherfield Commons, the Russian

22 See Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*.

23 Guy Debord in Giorgio Agamben, 'Difference and Repetition', page 313.

24 See Jacob Kipp, 'Lenin and Clausewitz'; and Mao Zedong, 'On Protracted War', pages 266-268.

25 Coup d'oeil is the ability to know instinctively how to deploy troops to maximise their effectiveness in a particular terrain of combat, see Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, page 127.

26 See Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, pages 230-341.

generals were definitely more skilful in implementing the 5 practical principles of *On War* which they'd learnt from *The Game of War*. They had made better use of this difficult terrain divided by an impassable river, they constantly intimidated the enemy with their self-confidence, they launched deadly pincer attacks on both flanks, they focused their firepower for the decisive blow against the Bonapartists' rearguard and they kept up relentless pressure until the Tsarist victory was achieved. Although more literal in its design than Debord's simulation, we'd proved that *Commands & Colors: Napoleonics* could also be successfully deployed as a teaching tool in Clausewitz's *On War*. On that spring afternoon at Furtherfield Commons, the Ludic Science Club had fulfilled its key Situationist objective. The skills of collective generalship were being practised on the game board. In the coming struggles for a truly human civilisation, cybernetic communists must know how to fight and win against neoliberal capitalism.

¡Hasta la victoria, siempre!

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