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WARGAMING THE 'BARBARIAN' INVASIONS OF ITALY 1494-1559

THE ITALIAN WARS ARE FUN

The Italian Wars have a lot to offer. It wasn't much fun for the French gendarmes at Pavia (1525), unhorsed and butchered by point-blank arquebus fire or a knife through the visor, nor for the Swiss pikemen at Marignano (1515), struggling to cross a deep ditch and climb a high bank under a hail of shot. If you like to see those armies you've lovingly painted drawn up in all their glory on the table, this period is for you!

Soldiers of most the nations involved were dressed in a riot of (sometimes clashing) colour. The sober Swiss weren't too sober in appearance. Even the most quietly-dressed landsknechts could legitimately be wearing at least four different colours. Hose were multi-striped, different colours on different legs. Jerkins and shirts were slashed with the material underneath pulled through the slashes. Hose could be cut short, leaving the leg bare, sometimes including the buttock! One more uniform element in clothing was the frequent wearing in some form of badges: the diagonal St Andrew's cross of the Empire for the landsknechts and the vertical cross for the Swiss Confederation.

Plumes and feathers abounded; we could paint the Emperor Maximilian with peacock plumes on his helmet and matching surcoat. The French gendarmes wore brightly coloured and embroidered surcoats. Horse furniture was equally spectacular with metallised, bronzed or leather horse-armor or coloured hangings. The heavy lances of the period were gaily-painted and might have coloured bands and spirals (although replacements would have been in plain wood). The larger cannon, the pride of Renaissance princes, were usually of bronze and richly engraved. Flags were greatly in evidence from the French fleur de lys to the Imperial eagles, Venetian winged lions to the Milanese vipers to a host of others.

Get yourself a French army where you can legitimately have a LOT of gendarmes – hopefully you'll find an opening for that devastating cavalry charge led by the brave Chevalier Bayard or by Gaston de Foix. Getting bored with painting armoured cavalry? No problem, start on a landsknecht pike unit, 30 figures, no two the same in colour. Put yourself a Swiss army of pikemen together: go like hell for the opposition and rely on your marching speed and ferocity in attack to do the business. Why not combine mounted men-at-arms and pikes, as French armies of the period often did? Alternatively try a force with plenty of hand-gunners, light infantry and artillery and shoot the other side down before they get to your carefully-organised and prepared field defences.

LEADERS

Leaders very frequently led from the front and not so infrequently paid for it with their lives. 11 out of 12 Spanish colonels were killed at Ravenna in 1512; Gaston de Foix was killed in an unnecessarily risky charge in his hour of triumph there; the Chevalier Bayard was laid low by an arquebus shot and Ridolfo Gonzaga died at Fornovo; the Constable of Bourbon was shot down outside the walls of Rome. All of these were some of the more illustrious dead. Of the three French kings – Charles VIII, Louis XII and Francis I – most closely involved in the Wars, Charles came within an ace of capture at Fornovo and Francis actually was captured at Pavia. All those command figures you lovingly spent painting time on certainly won't be wasted. They've a potentially vital role to play.

Talking of leaders, there's rich galaxy of figures that might be worth integrating special morale elements for. From Leonardo da Vinci as Cesare Borgia's siege engineer to the inspirational effect of a seasoned leader like Bayard, to Georg von Frundsberg – 'The Father of the Landsknechts' – by way of born generals capable of learning from their mistakes like the Marquis of Pescara to those scientific fighting soldiers the condottiere captains, personified by Prospero Colonna. Leadership (or lack of it) was certainly an even more important element in this period than in some others.

MIX AND MATCH!

Yet another advantage of the Italian Wars as a war-gaming subject is that it's an era, like, for example, the Later Roman Empire, where it's very much a 'mix and match' affair on the table. Units that are on one side in one game could legitimately be on the other in the next, depending on the scenario. If you look at it this way, when you're painting up a unit, you're really painting up at least two! A classic example of this was the League of Cambrai, put together by Pope Julius II against the power of the Venetians in northern Italy and consisting of the Holy Roman Empire and the Spanish, with the French providing the



Big battles - a chance to throw everything on the table!

main military muscle. After the crushing French victory over the Venetians at Agnadello (1509) the Pope and others then got the jitters about French power in the area and created the Holy League against them. The French promptly allied with the Venetians! Another example would be the Swiss, usually fighting with the French but against them and suffering a heavy defeat at Marignano (1515). From the Swiss occupation of Milan (1512-1515) you could put together a potentially very effective force of Swiss pikemen and Milanese armoured cavalry to fight against French gendarmes backed up by landsknechts.

TACTICS & TROOPS

The Italian Wars were at the dawn of a new military era and the slow death of an old one. This was a period of rapid military development - over a 50 year period came the rise of hand-held firearms and cannon. Neither were unknown at the start of the wars, but by the end both clearly on the way to battlefield dominance. However, the traditional pike and lance still had their place.

The potential make-up of an army reflects this. We could legitimately field on the same side all of the following: knightly heavy cavalry, light cavalry, mounted crossbow men and arquebusiers, pike-armed infantry, halberdiers, sword-and-buckler men, two-handed swordsmen, infantry crossbow men and foot arquebusiers. Not to mention, of course, a mixed bag of artillery. Such a variety of troops and capabilities presents all sorts of command and control problems on the table.

The cavalry

The mounted man-at-arms was still seen as the dominant figure on the battlefield. Contemporaries considered the French and Italian particularly effective. Their armour was superbly functional and the heavy lance a highly effective weapon in the hands of a skilled user. At Fornovo (1495) a Venetian medical man noted that many of the dead men-at-arms had been fatally wounded by an accurate lance blow to the neck. However, the lance was typically good only for one charge and even well

trained horses tired relatively quickly. Your gendarmes are going to look magnificent on the table but how much of a game-winner they're going to be is another matter ... though, according to a letter of Francis I, they were decisive at Marignano.

Light cavalry of various types existed: the French 'archers', who were in fact light cavalymen; Spanish 'jinetes' (or genitors), the javelin-armed products of the border warfare of the Reconquista; the famous stradiots from the Balkans, originally recruited particularly by the Venetians and armed with light lances and sabres and who were both fast and fearless (if inclined to looting). They were dressed picturesquely too. There are also mounted crossbowmen and hand-gunners, though it's not clear if they were mounted infantry such as the 'Black Bands' of Giovanni dei Medici or more genuinely like dragoons in that they were capable of some cavalry action. Whichever was the case, they're going to give you more tactical options on the battlefield, though they won't be able to stand up to men-at-arms.

However, compared with a lot of periods, there was plenty of cavalry in the earlier part of the Italian Wars; the French army that invaded in 1494 may have had cavalry that was, according to some calculations, at least 50% of its effectives. As the Wars continued, this ratio considerably diminished. Even so, if used in combination with other arms, something that unfortunately didn't happen correctly in battles such as Pavia, the men-at-arms can do a lot of damage; or at least threaten to do so, which is sometimes just as effective in a battle plan!

THE INFANTRY

The Italian Wars saw the development of a European type of infantry - a sort of 'universal soldier'. National infantries had arisen in the 15th Century but had been rather different in equipment and tactics (English longbows and Italian crossbows, for example). However, in the Italian Wars, composite armies were the norm. Cesare Borgia, in one campaign, had Swiss, Germans, Gascons and Italians in the same unit. The enemies in one cam-



paign could be the allies in the next and so it was highly likely that the 'cross-fertilization' occurred that helped to create more standardized infantry types. Two nations were instrumental in contributing most to this: the Swiss and the Spanish.

The Swiss were the close-order pike-armed infantry that had shocked Europe by destroying the armies of Charles the Bold of Burgundy 20 years before. There had been pike-armed medieval troops, but the weapon was used defensively. Not by the Swiss: compact squares and columns moved rapidly about the battlefield without breaking formation. They included some halberdiers and men with two-handed swords; their job was to help to break up the cohesion of any opposing pikemen. There were also skirmishers armed with missile weapons in support. Their battlefield discipline was ferocious and this, along with their speed of manoeuvre and aggressively made them very formidable opponents.

The landsknechts were, of course, in tactical terms, a direct imitation of the Swiss. It should be noted though, that contemporary illustrations suggest that the shot were much more 'integrated' into their units than was the case with the Swiss. A 1530 woodcut, for example, shows a landsknecht force at a review with 'sleeves' of shot flanking the squares and organ-gun artillery on the flanks. Another formation used was to station 'horns' of shot at each corner of the pike square.

For both forces you'll need a 'forlorn hope', made up of volunteers, men under punishment or chosen by lot, whose job was to try to disrupt the enemy attack so that their comrades could penetrate the opposing square. The landsknecht forlorn hopes displayed a plain red flag. Sometimes the forlorn hope was used as a decoy to encourage the enemy to charge, to be met by fire from the harquebusiers placed just behind them.

The Spanish forces at the very start of the wars had infantry grouped into pikemen, sword and buckler men and missile men in about equal quantities. However, from 1503 onwards Gonzalo de Cordoba integrated the sword and buckler men into the pike formations – the beginnings of the 'colunelas' (hence 'colonel' in later English). These colunelas had roughly 50% pikes, around 30-35% arquebus and the rest sword and buckler. Like the Swiss, this was an infantry designed for offensive action: the pikemen broke the enemy's front and the sword and buckler men pushed their way into the gaps and completed the disorganization. The colunelas were, of course, the direct ancestors of the famous 'tercios' which appeared after 1534 with the initial theoretical strength of 3,000: 75% pikemen to 25% shot (the sword and buckler men having disappeared). However, in general the actual figure was from 2 to 3,000 with the shot frequently making up 50% of this total.

The Italian states, with the exception of the Venetians and the Florentines in certain periods, were not enthusiastic pike users. When they did have pikemen these often came from the hardy inhabitants of the Romagna in Papal territory. Firearms, however, were widely adopted by the Italians.

The French, of course had their own native infantry, but it was generally seen as not being a match for the Swiss, the Germans

or the Spanish. It was raised (too) rapidly in times of war and disbanded when the emergency was over. The best French infantry were considered to be the Gascons from the south-west of France or the crossbowmen from the Dauphiné in the south-east.

Tactically, the disadvantage of the Swiss system was that it required open country to be really effective, otherwise it was much more difficult to manoeuvre the tightly-grouped squares. Its advantage, on the other hand, was that it was easily defensible on the flanks. Wargames rules should reflect this with pike formations not at risk from flank attacks.

Certainly, depending on what exact period of the Wars you're playing, the amount of shot will vary over time. At the beginning of the Wars only about 10% of the Swiss force were shot. By the time of the Swiss invasion of Milan (1511), the proportion was 25%. The Spanish were early adopters: The Great Captain had at least 15% of his infantry as arquebusiers from the beginning. The defence of the entrenched camp at the Battle of Cerignola (1503) and the defeat of the Swiss and French attack was mainly the work of Spanish shot. In fact, Nemours, the French commander, was hit and killed by arquebus fire while desperately trying to find a gap in the ditch dug by the Spaniards. Gonsalvo systematically tried to 'dig himself in' whenever possible.

It is after 1520 that really large bodies of infantry with firearms appear: 25% of Prospero Colonna's force at Milan (1521) or 33% of the Duke of Urbino's army. This latter was in 1527, a year where we find the Prince of Orange commanding two permanent companies entirely made up of arquebusiers. Giovanni dei Medici – 'of the Black Bands' - developed a genuine mounted infantry force of arquebusiers. At the Battle of Sesia (1524), the Imperialists wrecked the retreating French cavalry and Swiss pikes with a deluge of arquebus fire, incidentally killing the gallant Bayard. This was no victory for fire power behind entrenchments but one in the open field.

Entrenchments did play a significant part in a number of battles (Cerignola, Marignano and Bicocca, to name just three). It was certainly the case that over the 15th Century Italian captains had developed methods of operating from them, both as a 'pivot' for attack and as a fall-back position for defence. The Swiss tactical style displayed its limitations more than once in attacking entrenched positions. You'll need some ditches, field fortifications and gabions on your table.



Italian crossbowmen. Slowly replaced by early firearms.



Along with entrenchments you'll be entitled to field war-wagons as well. Whether these were quite as the ones used by the Hussites and the Hungarians in the earlier 15th Century is uncertain; an illustration shows a late 15th Century Imperial camp, for example, with a laager of wagons with sliding wooden doors each disclosing an artillery piece. At Ravenna the Spanish fielded at least 30 carts equipped with scythe blades, projecting spears and guns.

By the end of the Italian wars infantry had moved towards the system that would stay in place until the end of the 17th Century: the dual dependence of pikemen and musketeers.

A final point to note is that for most of the Italian Wars the musket, as opposed to the arquebus, was in very restricted use. It seems to have been mainly introduced by the Spanish; the original model being six feet long and necessitating the use of a forked rest. For a long time it was classed as an arquebus, so it's difficult to trace its exact development path. However, develop it did, slowly in some places (Florence had only 60 in 1527 according to the Venetian Ambassador), but its effectiveness, particularly in the hands of the Spaniards, impressed military opinion.

The artillery

From the first development of artillery in the later Middle Ages, the principal job of the guns had been that of reducing fortresses. Field artillery was only those guns of the siege train that were light enough to be brought onto the field. The late 15th Century and the Italian Wars saw improved means of transport and a common standard of mobility. The French had led the way with the adoption of the gun carriage – guns of all sizes on permanent wheeled supports. They were also systematic in their use of horses, able to move guns faster than oxen, as draught animals. All other armies adopted the French methods to varying degrees.

Artillery tactics in the field were, in the early part of the Wars, not very sophisticated. That being said, they were more sophisticated than those of the famous condottiere Bartolomeo Colleoni from a slightly earlier period (1475). He placed his guns behind his force and fired them through gaps formed – if everything went to plan – by a trumpet call!

During the early part of the Wars it was customary to post the guns in front of an army for a preliminary bombardment. However, more complex tactics did develop. At Ravenna (1512), there was a protracted cannonade over three hours, causing considerable casualties on both sides. The Duke of Ferrara, a celebrated artillery specialist fighting for the French, worked some guns round to the enemy's flank. His enfilading fire forced the Spanish cavalry out of cover and into an attack which failed. At Marignano (1515), the French artillery again played an important role in defeating the Swiss and showed artillery to be a vital part of the combination of arms on a battlefield.

In wargaming and modelling terms the cannon of the period are a delight. As many of them were bronze-cast - a sculptor's technique - they were elaborately decorated. As noted earlier, prestige display items were important for Renais-



Heavy cavalry are still king of the battlefield.

sance Princes and cannon were ideal for this. Louis XII had 12 large cannon named after famous knights.

Your wargames army should be equipped with some splendid-looking artillery which, if you position it correctly, may have a decisive effect on big targets like pike squares or massed heavy cavalry. At Novara (1513), it's reported that artillery fire killed 700 of an attacking Swiss column in three minutes.

ON THE TABLE

We've looked at the history, but how about the practice? How does the above pan out on the table? Let's take a look at a typical Italian Wars army:

Cavalry from 10-35%, light and heavy. The lights would include mounted crossbows or (from around 1515) arquebusiers.

Infantry from 30-50% pikes (including a sprinkling of two-handed swordsmen and halberdiers). The figure would be much higher for an exclusively Swiss force. 30-40% crossbows and hand-gunners, with more hand-gunners in proportion as the period goes on. Again, an exclusively Swiss force would probably have a lower proportion of shot than others.

If you have a Spanish *Colunela* you'll need a proportion of sword and buckler men – about 15% of the total should do it. Italian armies had sword and buckler - equipped light infantry too.

You'll need some artillery as well.

CONCLUSION

The Italian wars have it all: colour, clashing weapons technologies, exotic troop mixes and types and command and control and tactical problems to give even the most hardened war-gamer pause for thought. Can you do better than Francis I at Pavia? Can you find a way to marry Swiss headlong aggression with cavalry action and firepower? Do you really know how to site field fortifications effectively?

Mount your horse, straighten the plumes on your helmet, get on the table top and show them the answer to those questions! **WS&S**