

# *Historical, Design and Strategy notes for "The War of Gradisca 1615-1617"*

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"The War of Gradisca 1615-1617" is a low complexity game on a subject little studied by professional historians and even less treated in simulation games.

The causes of the conflict lie in the ancient rivalry between the Republic of Venice and the uncomfortable neighbor from the Habsburg house, Austria. There were many open questions between the two contenders: the alleged failure to support the defense of Christian Europe from the Turk, the definition of the eastern borders of the Republic, the possession of key fortresses on this border line, with Gradisca in the first place. Last but not least was the problem of the Uskoks, pirates of Catholic faith in Habsburg service, who for a long time had disturbed the merchant routes of Venice in the Adriatic Sea.

Col. Riccardo Caimmi has treated effectively in his "Guerra del Friuli" [1] the historical context that concerned the European powers of the time, Venice and Austria in the first place, but also the Empire, the Papal States, Savoy and the other Italian minor powers.

The time is the end of the Italian Renaissance period and the beginning of the Iron Century (as defined by Kamen in his splendid book [2]). The Italian Wars had concluded for some time, Italy is under the undisputed dominance of the imperial power by definition, Spain. Vanished is the dream of Charles V of the restoration of the global dominion of Christendom, fruitless the attempts of Philip II to impose by force the superiority of Spain in Europe, this nation still remains, despite many reversals and an inevitable decadence, "the reference Power" of the age.

Spain often dictates its law by force, and the center of its military force is the "tercio", the fearsome infantry formation, a mixture of pikemen and firearms, formed with the strictest discipline and able to fight while maintaining its compact formation. At least until about the

middle of the seventeenth century, the Spanish tercios will constitute the main axis of military action and therefore of the Spanish strategy.

Venice and Austria in this period are two minor powers by comparison, unable to project a force of size and quality akin to Spain. Especially Venice, which with the War of Gradisca closes all the history of its war adventures on "Terra Ferma" (its mainland), sees its vital economic spaces progressively narrowing, pressed by the Turk in the Middle East, the Habsburgs to its northern and eastern borders and the dizzying growth of the Atlantic maritime powers that are enhancing their global commercial network.

Generally speaking in these years Europe is agitated by profound destabilizing currents: the beginnings of the inevitable Spanish decadence and the consequent anxiety of dominance of the rival powers, the unresolved religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, the desires of local autonomy, the pressure of the Turk.

The War of Gradisca (or War of Friuli, or Uskok War) was a minor conflict with respect to the geopolitical scenario of the time. It was also a "low-intensity" conflict, especially as Venice feared the possible reaction of Austria's fearsome ally, Spain.

However, from the point of view of military history, it anticipates many themes that will unfortunately be of mournful relevance in the subsequent Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The Europe that will come out from this long war, in the middle of the century, will be a different and modern Europe, but the price paid by the populations will be very high.

In the War of Friuli, in the early years of the same century, many of the characteristics and military innovations that will be implemented later were already present or we could see traces of them.

I will now try to describe the characteristics of this conflict, through the explanation of the

main elements of the game "La Guerra di Gradisca 1615-1617". The second part of the article is instead dedicated to some strategy notes for the game itself.

## The Characters

I would like to start with the combat units. Too often we forget that wars are fought mainly by simple men (and women). The pay of a soldier at that time, when it arrived, was a small thing, just enough to cover the expenses for the food and some general supplies for a few days. The profession of the soldier was the only means for many people to rise only a little from absolute poverty.

In the game, infantry units are not distinguished by the type of weapon they carried. In fact the soldiers' companies, hired mainly in Veneto and Friuli, but also in other Italian states and many European nations, had a mixed proportion of pikes (around 30%), and of firearms: arquebuses and, growing in percentage towards the end of the war, muskets (in Prelli [3], page 64 and following). It does not appear, except in some single company, an exclusivity of pikes or firearms. Many of the troops employed by the Venetian side in the conflict were recruits at a very low price, and value, drawn from the fields of the republic, the "cernide". A cernida could be easily recruited from Venice, but its utility, due to poor discipline and reliability, was scarce. The number of cernide counters on the map is therefore limited compared to their actual historical presence.

In general, infantry on both sides consisted of units of medium-low quality and discipline, as testified also by counters with double fire values: even for the best units, the offensive capacity remained limited.

In the early 1600s the role of cavalry in battle had changed a lot. Heavy cavalry was now a distant memory. The only piece of heavy cavalry in the game ("Armati") has a greater usefulness in the game than it actually did. A group of nobles anchored to the memories of a bygone era, made up of a not very mobile unit and without the possibility, and willingness, to give

any contribution on the battlefield, now dominated by firearms.

The operating backbone of the cavalry arm was constituted by the companies of medium cavalry, "corazze" (armored), riders protected by medium armor, often in leather, equipped with firearms, mainly pistols, and trained in the "caracole" technique.

The use of the arquebus first and of the musket after, especially in the last phase of the war, was often reserved to the "musketeer" companies on horseback, who moved on horseback, but fought on foot.

Cavalry could be decisive in battle for its ability to circumvent a less mobile opponent. However for the duration of the war in question the main role of the cavalry remained that of the (more or less) planned and systematic actions of raids in enemy territories, protection or threats to supply lines, and the rapid projection of military force especially in a defensive role. The technique of reconnaissance of the terrain before the battle was not employed, a sign of a strategic approach to the conflict that was difficult to emerge.

It will be necessary to await the innovations of Gustav Adolf in the Thirty Years' War, to see cavalry deployed on the battlefield and capable again of truly effective charges.

The distinction between medium cavalry ("corazze") and light cavalry was sometimes blurred. In the game, light cavalry units are the ones that most demonstrated a real ability to effectively penetrate enemy territory.

Players soon learn that it is not generally appropriate to force the role of cavalry units out of their historical role.

The "Guastatori" units (Engineers) are probably the most important type of unit in the game. The Guastatori of the time, ancestors of the current Engineer units, were in fact employed for the most diverse activities: excavation and earthworks, construction of mobile and stable defenses, mine and countermine operations. Venice invested many resources in the formation of these special corps, but their

number never seemed sufficient ([3], p.123). In effect, the needs of the offensive war of the time focused the attention on the establishment of armies capable of supporting siege warfare. The spread throughout Europe, in a relatively short period, of fortresses with heavy walls or bastions pushed in the direction of the specialization of corps dedicated to this type of war and to the improvement of artillery technology.

For reasons of simplification, artillery units are indiscriminately artillery and siege artillery, as well as the personnel involved in the operation and management of the guns, named "Bombardieri".

The presence of the Guastatori alongside the artillery allowed the creation of earthworks, useful to artillery units for defensive purposes and to improve the positioning of the guns.

These elements are then shown in the game, along with the possibility of elimination of the artillery unit, if subject to too intensive usage (artillery units are eliminated "if they roll a 6"). This reflects the logistical and organization difficulties in maintaining operational such a complex technology for the time.

The construction of stable fortifications was a common practice during the war. A number of forts were built on both sides in defense or in preparation of attacks on enemy positions. The fight for the conquest of enemy strongholds thus became central to operations. The presence of a Fort marker in an area, therefore, represents the construction of one or more small or medium-sized forts that presided over the area.

Soon after the initial impetus of the Venetian army that almost took possession of the fortress of Gradisca in the first months of 1616, the war turned into a confrontation between two contenders in a predominantly defensive attitude, with frequent incursions in the opponent's field. The operations found new momentum only with the arrival of fresh troops on both sides. In other words, a "small war" began, made of more or less structured incursions into the enemy lines.

The game distinguishes between a systematic and planned incursion aimed at the devastation or depletion of the enemy territories ("Raid"), and a form of simple disturbance of the enemy troops, a task attributed above all to light cavalry ("Incursion").

The devastation of enemy territory was a practice that was unfortunately widespread in this war. It must be stressed here that one of the main effects of the war was the state of profound poverty, exhaustion and destitution caused to the whole population of Friuli, from which the population recovered only after many decades.

### **The Command**

Understanding the orders of battle and the real hierarchies within the two camps was surely the most complex aspect faced for the creation of the simulation. The number of captains and commanders in the various corps was really impressive, reflecting the state of confusion of the general command, especially on the Venetian side.

This has repercussions, especially for the Venetian side, in the large number of Commands involved and in the initial, in some ways irrational, setup of the forces on the field.

The captains in play are the "Capitani Generali" (captains general) of the two armies and those who had an effective influence on the conduct of the operations.

The Venetian Pompeo Giustiniani, esteemed and experienced general, was appointed Capitano Generale of the Venetian army after various events. However, the lack of vision of the Venetian politicians, married to a general inability to understand military actions as something different from political matters, left Giustiniani without a real decision-making power to conduct all operations, having to manage daily personalities, rivalries and misconduct of his lower ranking, perhaps influential and politically important characters, but often incapable of a strategic vision.

All this resulted in a general impossibility to coordinate with speed and adequacy the forces

in the field during the war , in effect reducing the offensive potential of the Venetian army.

On the Austrian side things went a little better, since the authority of the captain general, Trautmannsdorf, was never in fact questioned.

For both sides, the state of confusion in the general command, the difficulty in carrying out coordinated offensive actions, the presence of autonomous and uncoordinated command centers are simulated with the activation in random sequence of commands and with the play of cards, which always yield uncertainty about the outcome of military actions planned by players.

How war was "divisive" is witnessed by the presence of the commander Riccardo di Strassoldo, commander of the Austrian Gradisca garrison, and the contemporary presence of his relative Carlo di Strassoldo in the Venetian camp.

### **Logistics**

As in the previous century, the armies of the seventeenth century were accompanied by a large number of civilian personnel with the most disparate characteristics and professions. These "armies of support" were employed for the sustenance, from all points of view, of soldiers at war. They were in fact also centers for the purchase and exchange of goods that served soldiers in combat. It can therefore be seen as a sort of "commercial center" of the time, with a minimum movement capacity. The "Camp" counter represents, abstractly, all this. It does not constitute an element of strength of the armies, but a point of arrival of the necessary supplies, and therefore a crucial point to defend.

The logistic machine for bringing supplies and reinforcements to the battlefield was highly complex at the time and lent itself to easy traffic jams. The crucial supplies were obviously the food, which however could be purchased or, less frequently than what is usually thought, stolen directly from the land, and the material that was needed for an army to work: money for wages, gunpowder, horses, timber, rope, tar,

etc. This material had to come from what we call now the sources of supply, but supply and transportation were not simple, even in the absence of corrupt officials.

All this complexity, which wargame players do not normally like, but which is the key to a victorious campaign, is extremely simplified in the game, which only distinguishes between basic supplies (for everyday life) and a special supply of these materials aimed at an offensive campaign (attack supply).

### **Strategy Notes**

*Important note! The following pages present some strategic notes that are among the most stimulating things for a wargame player interested in personally discovering the roads to victory. Continue only with this awareness.*

With the map in front of us, let us observe the main axes on which the War of Gradisca took place. The first axis, and the front where the main war operations took place, is the east-west route that starts from the Veneto, passes through Palma, Gradisca, and the areas east of it, mainly Rubbia (Rubia) and Gorizia (Gorizia). The second front, dealt with in a simplified way, is Istria: Pirano, Capo d'Istria, Muggia and Trieste. A minor but important line of attack for both sides is that which goes from Pontebba to Tarvisio (Tarvis), to the north. Finally, the direction from Udine and Cividale to Caporetto (Chiavoretto) and the Isonzo valley should be mentioned.

While it is clear that the main operations, even in the game, take place on the main front, where there is the greatest possibility of accumulation of "heavy" Victory Points, the other fronts can not be underestimated and indeed victory, in the end, may come from the so-called secondary fronts.

On the main front, as a rule, the Venetian has two initial tasks: to get rid of the thorn in his side constituted by the presence of the Austrian garrison in Aquileia (in this the Pompei Command may be useful) and prepare, if this is its strategic intention, to besiege Gradisca which can only take place after a few turns. The

siege must be taken with some measures, if possible: to occupy as many areas as possible around the fortress, (for example: Rosazzo, Crauglio and Sagrado), to reduce the possibility of dangerous Austrian "interference"; to concentrate the Venetian commands in a few areas; to build a Fort in the areas where Mine operations or bombardment of the Fortress will be carried out, to better defend from any sortie or bombardment from the Fortress.

Having created a breach, the Venetian will have to employ one of their best corps to attack inside the Fortress, typically the Giustiniani command, which, thanks to the presence of the Commander, is well suited for his ability to accumulate troops and attack.

If a breach is created, the Austrian must not lose heart: the garrison has troops of good quality and they will normally resist for several attacks. You can get an additional "hit" instead of retreating, take advantage of this as often as you can: Gradisca is the pivot of the Austrian defense and you cannot afford to lose it. The only unit of Guastatori in Gradisca is vital for rebuilding the walls or for countermining them. But if the Venetian side is not aggressive, it might be a good idea to send this unit out of the Fortress to build a Fort in Rubia or Goritia as soon as possible. These areas are in fact vital for the Austrian and every opportunity must be used to reinforce them.

Palma is out of reach of Austria, and unless the Venetian side proves to be totally unwary, its siege is a dangerous and inadvisable undertaking. Much more important can be Udine (Victory points) and Cividale (the point of arrival of important Venetian reinforcements).

Monfalcone is a determining area. It is an advanced arrow of the initial Venetian setup, thorn in the side this time for the Austrian. But above all it is "the" landing zone of the Dutch contingent towards the end of the game. If Monfalcone at that time is in the hands of Austria, perhaps with a Fort, the risk of non-entry of the Dutch is high.

Istria appears as a secondary front. Trieste is well defended and, although the Venetian

"Istria" Command is large, it does not seem able to easily break through the Austrian defenses and conquer Trieste. Apparently.

The Venetian begins the game with card 1 in hand, which allows him to disembark in Istria. This could convince the Venetian player to immediately open hostilities in Istria. Actually, holding that card in hand, maybe waiting for the similar card 2 to arrive, could be a valid strategy, if the Austrian player in the first part of the game, not seeing activity in Istria, decides to move part of the Trieste garrison to the main front. In this case, playing cards 1 and 2 in a single turn may be the turning point of the war in Istria. Note that the game allows, even if it discourages with a progressive disorganization, the accumulation of any number of units in the same area. This practice should be adopted in Istria, to increase the chances of breaking through, at the cost of some more disorganized units.

A road to weaken the Trieste garrison is ... the outbreak of an epidemic or famine. These events, dictated by the cards, can be an advantage for the Venetian player, especially if his troops have not yet landed in Istria.

If the Venetian player is undecided or inactive in Istria, his opponent must not hesitate to move any of his troops out of Trieste: the city is fortified, with a Fort, in difficult terrain, therefore very well defended and those troops will serve you more in Monfalcone, or in Rubia.

The war in Istria can be difficult and long, but do not give up defending or putting pressure there, because the result is probably a defeat if you give up.

The northern front is secondary, but it can give you some precious victory points, with a little attention and without a great effort in terms of forces. Remember that you do not need Attack Supply, if you attack with less than three combat units. The Venetian must remember to bring some additional units to the north (Gemona and Pontebba), otherwise it will be easy to make "Bottino" (Booty) for the Austrian reinforcements, which all come from the north.

In addition, it is probably better to defend out of Pontebba, with an advanced defense.

The central part of the map, between Cividale and the Isonzo valley, has many areas with difficult terrain. This is the privileged place of incursions and raids from cavalry, which has a greater ability to move. Keep in mind that if the Venetian player manages to block the route for reinforcements and supplies that passes through the Isonzo valley (without being in turn isolated), the Austrian player will be in serious difficulties.

### **The cards**

The game features a deck of 36 cards representing historical-political events, natural disasters, some military tactics, etc.

This is not a "card-driven" game, but certainly the cards play a fundamental role in reproducing the historical setting and in the strategy for victory. They are therefore a fundamental part of the simulation.

For the Austrian player, according to my opinion, it is essential to draw as many cards as possible in the first turns of the game, in order to increase the probability of the arrival of his reinforcements. This can cause "undesirable effects" for the Austrian player, but it is certain that without those reinforcements, the Austrian side will not easily resist the Venetian 1616 offensive.

The Austrian reinforcements have a long road to walk, a few turns to enter the operation zone, and therefore every turn gained is important. Use the Corps made up of small garrisons to draw cards, that's their purpose.

A useful card for the Austrian player is the "Confusion in the Veneto Command" which, especially in the early turns, can nip the Venetian offensive ambitions in the bud and give Austria an invaluable turn.

The Dutch contingent card brings in massive reinforcements in favor of the Venetian side, and has a roughly 50% chance of being played (roughly because there is actually a possibility that the card is never played by the end of the

game). This prevents the Venetian player from thinking of his strategy only on the basis of these reinforcements, and so also the Austrian player to set up a defensive strategy solely based on this event.

Holding a series of cards favorable to the enemy side (or unfavorable to his own side) can be a tactic, but, in my opinion, it will not pay you back, because it precludes the set of possibilities that have been studied to facilitate the task to "your" part, first of all, reinforcements.

### **The road to victory**

The road to the Venetian victory is full of mishaps and various traps. That of Austria is a dangerous and slippery road: you have to put in place all your knowledge on the dynamics of the game, remain more defensive than on the offensive and take every opportunity to block the Venetian plans and give the opponent some sound lessons, if he's too bold.

The Austrian must keep in mind that in 1615 and at the beginning of 1616 it is the Venetian who has the initiative, because superior in troops and resources. But if he cleverly plays his cards, after the middle of 1616 the Austrian player will be able to deploy a generally superior force. Until the arrival of the Dutch troops on the map, remember that the Austrian side has the best combat units. A special mention goes to the Uskok Corps, which is unlikely to be defeated in field combat, if the odds ratio is not too much to its disfavor. The Austrian should use this weapon like a pointed "stiletto", not like an axe, on his opponent. If all goes well, the Austrian player will be in a position of such an advantage in the first months of 1617, that the arrival of the Dutch reinforcements will not be able to shift the balance of victory.

All in all, have fun!

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