

A Game Of War
By Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord
Reviewed by Rob Morgan

There we are, the title of this excellent volume has caught your attention already! This is a '*Kriegspiel*' in a book. Of course the origin of the splendid and royally encouraged military game of the 1800's has been discussed and analysed for decades, not least in the pages of this august publication over some years.

That a campaign game of maps, dice, and model troops developed after Bonaparte shook European Princes and Generals to their boots, should become a valuable part of the training of German and later Russian, French and other European army officers is no surprise. Feld-Marshal Helmuth von Moltke '*The Man of Silence*' loved the war game, and played it often, as did Kron-Prinz Wilhelm. Of course the German wargame developed from early '*Kriegspiel*' to become a key aid to their military planning at Staff level as well as in the *MilitarAkademie*. The first and later versions of the Schlieffen Plan were put to test in '*Kriegspiel*', and even the staid and uninspiring British General Lord Kitchener is said to have shown interest in the wargame as a means of developing initiative among Commanders. Though regrettably there was little backing for the concept in official circles either in Britain or the USA, until Schlieffen's campaign in the West opened in August 1914.

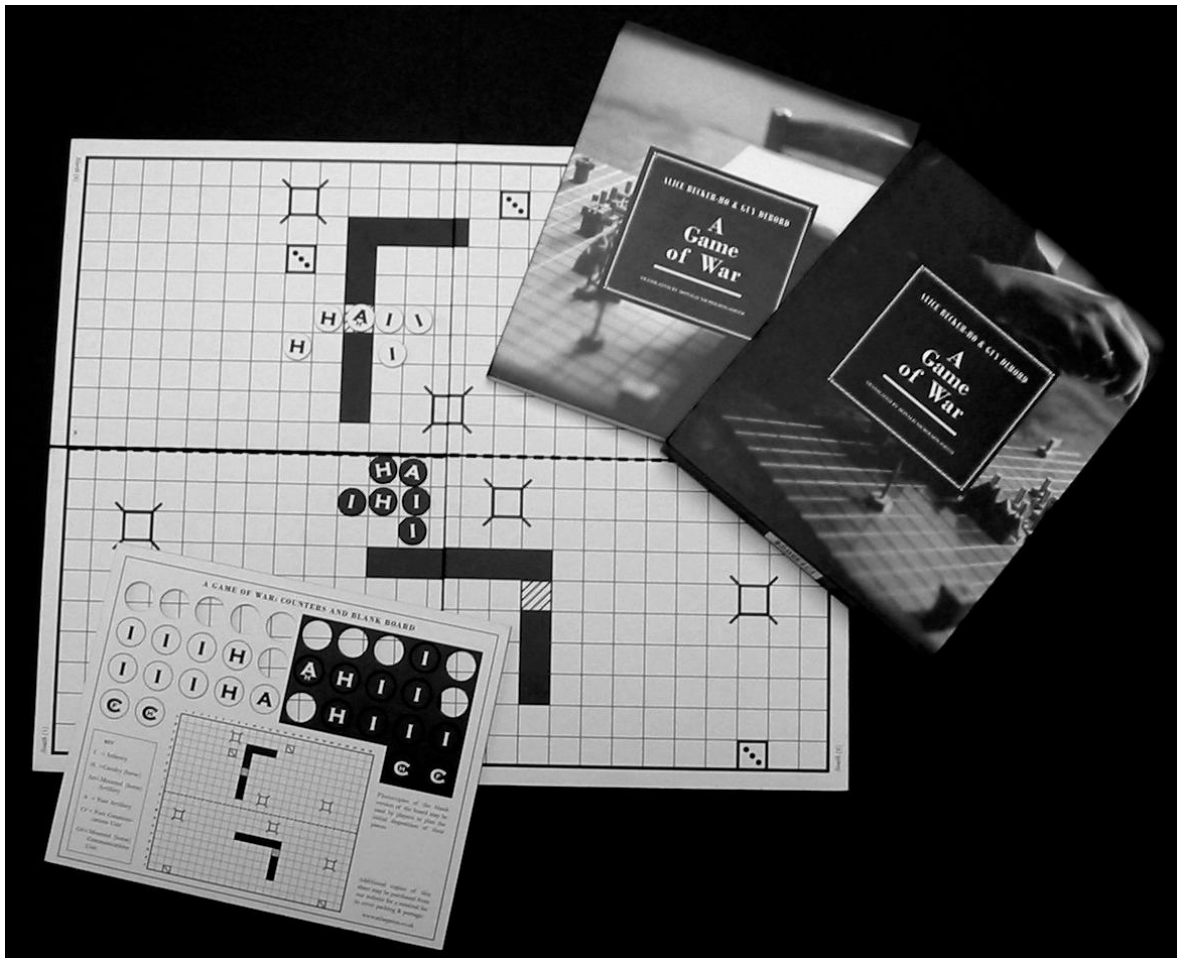
The early 1850's wargames were land-based naturally. It wasn't until June 1898 when the legendary Fred T. Jane read a paper on a naval war game at the United Services Institute that war at sea attracted gaming attention, and support among the highest innovative circles in the Admiralties of Britain, Japan and surprisingly Russia. A book on Jane's game was published in English and Japanese in 1912 and the rules are still playable to this day. There's a poignant note incidentally, to be found in the Preface of '*A Game of War*' telling us that Guy Debord had invented a workable naval '*Kriegspiel*' at around the same time, in the mid-1960's, but of that, nothing remains, sad to say.

Wargames seem so very much more sophisticated now than when I first rolled a dice in the early 1960's. Yet this book, a boxed set is a better term that I'm reviewing here, though it dates from 1965 when Guy Debord its originator patented it in France as '*Jeu de la Guerre*', is a game of the purest 19th century military '*Kriegspiel*' form. A true delight.

Published in a first-ever English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith in 2007, this is a long-awaited edition of an elusive work originally published in Paris in 1987. It was then accompanied by a hand-crafted table top board and pieces to represent two opposing armies. Though for some unknown or untold reason, in 1991 Guy Debord had all copies of '*A Game of War*' pulped. This book in its present form is a remarkable survivor!

What Atlas Press has published is a handsome boxed set of a board and pieces, the board in four sections making up into a 16.5" by 13.5" (24cm by 34 cm) playing area marked with terrain features, arsenals, fortresses and with pieces to represent 9 infantry units, 4 cavalry, and one each

of horse and foot artillery, and 2 communications units. These are all in stiff card and safely retained in the box.



There are full instructions for the game, and indeed every conceivable aspect of the historical *'Kriegspiel'* is covered, but all in mounted, horse-drawn or marching form. The symbols used, the original sets were produced in etched copper with moulded terrain features and unit pieces and markers, and the characteristics of the forces in play are given adequate explanation. The rules, and there are 16 pages of these in all, covering *'Tactical Engagement'*, *'Communications'*, and as with the original 19th century game, *'The Conduct of War'* (Or, 'Don't let's be beastly to the Germans' - to paraphrase Noel Coward!) and an interesting section entitled *'Some Under-Represented or Absent Factors'* which I warmly recommend to those who field armies of supermen, mounted upon steeds like Pegasus, with batteries of guns to every yard of front. Thoroughly researched and well written rules these are, and should be regarded as easily playable.

The second half of the book consists of a record of a typical wargame. The successive movements of forces, deployment, battle and exploitation of victory in a game played by Debord and his colleague Gerard Lebovici, in the 1970's Guy Debord said he wanted *'to imitate poker'* rather than chess in interpreting warfare, which is not a bad idea, and it seems he succeeded.

This is no roll of the dice and simple counting of effect game. It's creator estimated, correctly in my opinion, that to complete the '*Kriegspiel*' would take around two hours in real time, and some hundred or more moves if each side starts equal in forces - though that can be altered in true campaign gamesmanship form!

Not only is this a very playable concept of 19th century war, it's a very readable book. I found much of Debord's comments and advice as the book progressed, and particularly the notes collected after his death, provided an interesting insight into my understanding of the historical '*Kriegspiel*'. In fact, upon closing '*A Game of War*', I found myself picking up my long neglected copy of Gortals' seminal work on '*The German General Staff*' for inspiration on how to cross defended mountain passes!

I heartily recommend this book and its accompanying game, despite the fact that it seems at first sight rather costly at £20 - I've no idea what it sells for in the USA. Not merely because I feel that a rarity such as this, a military wargame vividly created with the hindsight of Schlieffen, of Ludendorff and arguably reflecting the events of Tannenberg (1914) is of substantial value to us as historians and gamers. I also do so because I feel that this may turn out to be the only time that this intuitive and fascinating production enters the English language.

I'll end with Debord's final, most fitting quote on his version of wargaming. It comes from Marcus Heronymus Vida's 1527 poem on chess.....

'Ludimus effigiem belli.'

“What we play is a representation of war.”

So it is.

Do buy it!

“A Game of War”. Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord. 2009. Atlas Press. Paperback, £20. Boxed set. ISBN 978-1-900565-38-7.

Editor's Note: this is currently available on amazon.com starting at US\$23.49.