

THE BATTLE OF NARVA

20th November 1700

by Pete Berry

In the month of September 1700 the Swedish troops garrisoning the town of Narva, a small but strategically significant settlement near the East Baltic coastline, found themselves under siege. The besiegers were the soldiers of Tsar Peter the Great. The Russian monarch had decided that at last the time was ripe to capture his "window on the West" – a means of creating a Russian presence in the Baltic.

To this end he entered into a triple alliance with Denmark and Saxony, two other states with much to gain at Sweden's expense. All three powers were confident in their actions as the Swedish army was tiny compared to their collective strength, and the Swedish monarch, Charles XII, was a teenager, inexperienced in war and statecraft. Here was stealing candy from a baby on a very grand scale indeed.

The Swedes garrisoning Narva were as aware of this as the Tsar, but they grimly defended their positions. They could see the Russian forces daily building up, and the siege works grew more extensive and more complete. Narva itself lay in a bend of the river Narova, on a bridging point which connected it with the old citadel of Ivanogrod. The Russian siegeworks took the form of a vast arc bending away from the town, with its ends resting on the banks of the river. After the initial circumvallation had been built to keep the defenders in, the Russians turned to defending their own lines. To guard the main road into Narva a raised platform was constructed, fortified and provided with artillery. This bastion was duly dubbed "Fort Troubetsky" in honour of its commanding officer. To guard against any attempts to raise the siege from the east, a line of contravallation was raised, reinforced by deep trenches, parapets, *chevaux de frise* and palisades. To the south of Fort Troubetsky the two lines of fortifications ran more or less parallel to each other, with a distance of 30 to 50 metres between them. To the north of Fort Troubetsky the lines were inclined a little to the west, partly to take advantage of the lie of the land and partly to protect a pontoon bridge which had been thrown across the river near the village of Kamperholm. As the permanent bridge across the river Narova was controlled by the garrison of Narva the pontoon bridge was the sole line of communication between the Russian army and their home country. By the time of the climax of the siege the besieging force numbered over 70,000 men and 180 guns.

By October a strange rumour began to sweep through the Russian lines. Incredible as it seemed, the Swedes, instead of suing for peace, had actually taken up the gauntlet and in a bold counterstroke had invaded Denmark and forced the Danes out of the war. Perhaps a little more disquieting was the rumour that an army of the same madmen led by their boy-king was sailing across the Baltic to raise the siege of Narva.

Huddled behind the ramparts of their massive siegeworks the Russians became more uneasy as, on November 18th and 19th, a steady stream of beaten and frightened troops began to straggle into camp bearing tales of how an unstoppable force was pushing in all of the outposts and pickets and was less than a day's march away. These may have only been rumours, but they certainly had a dramatic effect on one participant in the siege.

Peter I Romanov, Tsar of all the Russias, was at Narva to oversee the final stages of his triumph. However, upon hearing about the nearby presence of the Swedes, he decided precipitately that he was needed elsewhere. "Elsewhere", was

anywhere in fact where the Swedes were not about to arrive, and under pretext of visiting a more southerly force of soldiers sent to head off the Swedes, Peter left the camp so quickly he abandoned his jewels and his personal case of champagne. Behind him he left a Frenchman, the Duc du Croy, to oversee the Russian forces. This worthy had only been present at the siege as a neutral observer. He spoke no Russian, had little regard for the qualities of the Russian peasant soldier, and was unwilling to undertake the job. Peter himself had to "persuade" the nobleman to undertake the task, and when Peter the Great under the influence of several bottles of brandy personally persuaded you to do something it was a very strong man indeed who was not persuaded!

So, 70,000 Russians, admittedly ill-equipped and ill-trained, stood behind their defences and cannon and waited. What professional officers they had spoke German or French only, and were mistrusted, while native Russian officers were noted for drunkenness or stupidity, or both. But numbers and position were solidly on their side.

But what of the Swedes? Charles XII had led his men in a punishing march to reach Narva, with little rest, no food and in the teeth of the Baltic winter elements. The sheer haste of his breakneck march had had its toll, and the Swedish force that reached Narva on 20th November numbered no more than 10,500 men. Even with the best troops in Europe, what could Charles and his generals hope to do to the massive Russian defences?

The answer was reached fairly quickly. Sitting on the hill overlooking the Russian positions, the Swedes saw the two major weaknesses in the Russian position. Firstly, the sheer number of men packed into the constricted space of the two defensive lines meant that Russian lateral communication and manoeuvre was almost impossible. Secondly, the Russians had only one escape route to home soil – the pontoon bridge.

Contemporary military practice, as conducted by gentlemen in more southerly climes would have meant that the Swedes should have begun a lengthy siege, digging saps and approaches. However, sieges of this type were conducted when the attackers outnumbered the defenders, and not vice versa. Moreover, as readers of my earlier pieces on the Swedish army of this period may remember, the Swedish monarch's temperament was not fitted for patient spadework. The only option was immediate attack, and plans were drawn up accordingly.

Two principal points of attack were decided upon, one either side of Fort Troubetsky. The Foot were split into two groups, and formed into deep columns of attack, the right hand force under General Otto Vellingk, the left under General Carl Gustav Rhenskiöld. The artillery under master gunner Johan Sjobladh was also divided into two groups, one to engage in counter battery fire with the guns of Fort Troubetsky, the other to support the attack of the infantry columns. To facilitate this dual role the artillery was formed into one large body, and placed in between the two groups of Foot. This use of massed infantry columns and artillery support would seem to belong more to the age of Napoleon than that of Marlborough, but, as in everything else, the Swedes preferred to be the exception rather than the rule!

The Horse reserve under Johann Ribbing was placed to the rear of the left hand infantry column. Their task was to exploit

the initial breakthrough and by riding through the breaches established by the Foot, sweep to the rear of the Russian positions and cut off the lines of retreat.

The two main bodies of Horse were placed on the extreme flanks of the infantry columns. Their initial task was to demonstrate along the length of the fortifications, attracting the attention of the defenders, and at the same time preventing them from making a flank attack on the columns by sallying over the defence works. This turned out to be an unnecessary precaution, as the Russians remained resolutely attached to their fortifications.

Charles had thus deployed his army so as to concentrate his numerically inferior forces at two narrow points. The Russians, deployed on a long and constrictive front were to be unable to concentrate their vastly superior forces to counter their enemy. In effect, the sheer size of the ill-trained army was to be used against it.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the attack commenced. With the grenadiers formed as the front of the attacking columns, the Foot began their assault. Equipped with fascines, they were to storm the Russian positions in the fashion they had learnt so well – a point blank volley and a charge to finish the job with cold steel.

As the attack was launched it seemed that the Swedes had recruited the weather on to their side. A sudden and heavy snow began, with the wind blowing directly into the faces of the defenders. The Russian artillery tried to bear on the advancing columns, but inflicted few casualties. The blank white wall of snow conspired to hide the heads of the advancing columns until they were within 30 metres of the entrenchments. At this stage, both bombardiers and musketeers attempted to stop the bluecoats, but in their agitated states fired high or wide. Looming out of the snowfall, the Swedes checked slightly to deliver a single devastating volley, and with shouts of "Fall On!" and "God our Help", charged forward to the extreme discomfort of those brave or foolish souls who still held their posts.

The breaches in the Russian lines were made within fifteen minutes of the start of the attack, and in less than half an hour the Russian lines had been so badly ruptured that all transmission of orders became impossible. The Russian higher command, always suspect, was now totally non-existent.

However, that was not to say the Swedes had won the battle. Far from it, for on a man-to-man basis they were still heavily outnumbered. Prompt and decisive action was required to keep the advantage. Accordingly, Vellingk led his columns of troopers through the breaches, and then obliquely to the right, thus outflanking the main body of the Russian left wing. Rhenskiold on the left executed a similar movement, channeling the movement of the Russians back to their sole line of retreat, the pontoon bridge.

In the south, it was General Wiede's Russians who took the brunt of the attack, being forced away from their original positions, eventually to adopt a defensive position on an area of high ground behind the lines. The Russian Horse who were positioned to his rear took one look at the advancing Swedes, and decided that they would best serve Mother Russia by saving themselves to fight another day. In their panic, many attempted to swim the Narova. Unfortunately for them the river proved to be swift and dangerous. One estimate places the loss of life by drowning in this single incident at over one thousand men and horses.

To the north the Swedish advance went as planned and the panic-stricken Russians were herded through their camp and towards the bridge. With all military organisation fast disappearing, the pontoon bridge was soon choked by a mass of Russian peasantry. The inevitable happened, and the bridge collapsed, drowning many, but also cutting off the only practical

escape route for some 70,000 Russians.

As often happens in these situations, individuals and units found some resolve, and a hasty defence was now conducted. The Semenovski and Preobrazhenski regiments – the Tsar's Guards, and the best troops in the army, built a makeshift fort out of overturned waggons, and began the most tenacious defense of the battle. In fact, in terms of Swedish casualties and length of resistance, this and General Wiede's stubborn resistance in the south mark the real battle of Narva.

So great did the Guards' resistance become that Charles was obliged to send for Vellingk's command to reinforce his attacks on the barricade. A holding force was left to ensure that Wiede's command did not get up to any mischief. Fort Troubetsky had to be stormed, and it was the eventual fall of this strongpoint that saw the resistance finally begin to die down. Even so, it was not until 8 o'clock in the evening that the surrender of the Guards was obtained, and Wiede held out until two hours after midnight. With the fall of this last force, the Swedish triumph was complete.

When one considers the odds involved in the battle, the casualty figures for both sides are also truly impressive. Total Russian dead and wounded may have been as high as 20,000, all of the remainder being taken prisoner. All of the Russian baggage train, supplies, artillery and waggons fell to the conquerors, as well as vast amounts of colours. Against this, the Swedes lost about 700 killed and 1200 wounded.

A dramatic victory indeed. The results were many and varied. Certainly it made the rest of Europe sit up and take notice of the boy-king of Sweden. From this point onwards until his death he was treated as a potential ally and a feared enemy by the rest of Europe. By 1707, both France and the Maritime Powers were attempting to sway him into aligning himself with them. The intervention of the Swedish army at that stage of the War of the Spanish Succession would have been dramatic to say the least, and is surely the basis of a fascinating "what if" campaign.

To the Russians, Narva was a crushing blow. Yet, it proved to be a temporary one. Peter rebuilt his army, and even learnt from his mistakes and failures. Better officers were recruited, soldiers were trained and equipped more thoroughly. It was to be a long time before the Russians were to best the Swedes in battle, but the lessons taught at Narva were used to bring about Charles XII's eventual defeat on the field of battle. But that is another story.

To the Swedes, Narva marked the beginning of a whole series of military successes and triumphs, where to bring an enemy to battle was to beat him, no matter what the odds. Unfortunately, the very ease of this extraordinary victory proved to be self-defeating, in that it seemed to give Charles a feeling of contempt for the Russian army that he was unable to shake off, and instead of taking the opportunity to finish off his most implacable opponent caused him to waste the next years thrashing his enemies in Saxony and Poland, thus giving Peter a much-needed breathing space to recruit and develop his forces.

WARGAMING THE BATTLE

No matter what scale you choose, this battle will be spectacular! The Russian lines will need a LOT of room to show them off to their best advantage. The river Narova should be impassable except at the bridges, and care should be taken to ensure that units have to deploy properly to be able to cross the pontoon bridge, thus creating some nice bottlenecks. A simple mechanism can be brought into play to decide at which point the bridge may collapse, perhaps dependent upon the amount of use it is getting in any one move.

The fortifications proved passable to the Swedish Horse, after they were stormed by the Foot, so mounted troops should be allowed to cross such obstacles with little or no penalty, once a breach has been effected. However, Swedish Horse were able

to cross the lines, once the defenders had abandoned their posts. Perhaps this could also be allowed, but at a far slower movement rate? Fort Troubetsky held out longer than other sections of the line, so it should have an increased defensive value. The Russian camp proved to be well provided with the material for building a last ditch redoubt capable of holding several battalions, and again provision for hastily erected wagon laagers should be made.

For the Russians, there should be a restriction on the range and effect at which they can open fire upon the advancing Swedes, reflecting the effect of the snowstorm. An umpire is a must for this type of game, as he can roll a random weather effect, which neither player can depend on. Once the Swedes are through, the Russian's only chance to win is to concentrate his unwieldy forces upon his smaller opponent, remembering that he can afford to take casualties at a rate of seven to one in a battle of attrition. However, his shaky morale may mean a more subtle approach is required. Again, the lack of an overall command structure can be reflected in a random roll at the beginning of each turn to determine the number of units he may actually move. At the final reckoning, a total victory can only come by killing a large amount of the attacking force, or better than that, killing Charles XII himself, whilst a moral victory can be obtained by getting a large part of the army away from the battlefield without being captured.

The Swedes must make use of their advantages of quality, leadership and surprise. The initial attacks must be quick and incisive if any headway is to be made, and they cannot afford to lose the tempo. If the game bogs down into a simple confrontation, the weight of numbers ranged against them will soon tell. A total and complete victory can perhaps only mirror the historical result. Every loss over that, and every Russian who gets away can only detract from that result. In actual fact, neither side has an easy option.

As another alternative, because of the static nature of one side, Narva is an ideal situation for solo play, or a "Pony Wars" style game, where the player(s) all play the Swedes, and the Russian horde is controlled by an umpire and some simple pre-programmed responses. Whichever way it is played, it will be a fascinating game.

THE ARMIES

The Russians

The Russian army of this period is a shadowy organisation at best. Of the 70,000 combatants, 30,000 were peasant levies. Their military training and usefulness would have been limited. Voltaire gives us an idea of the appearance of these souls: "The rest were savages, torn from their forests, clad in the skins of wild beasts, some armed with bows and arrows and others with clubs." (Reminds me of some wargames conventions that I've attended . . .). Strong arms for digging ditches, but of limited use. I would not guess at their organisation, unless to state that units of about a thousand or so seems to be as good as any other. Within these irregulars, there would probably have been a fair sprinkling of cossacks, but as to what proportion I leave up to the individuals. These should not be the "extra light, megam morale, multi-armed" super troops of many a wargamer's fevered imagination, but a bunch of inebriated mounted thugs, who would quite fearlessly jump half their own number of opponents from behind, provided they were aged under ten, mortally wounded, or even better, already dead to start with.

The rest of the Russian army was mainly infantry. Peter the Great had only a few dragoons, and if we grant that he had two regiments at Narva, totalling a maximum of 2,000 men, this leaves approximately 38,000 foot soldiers to represent. Nothing was standardised in the Russian army of this period, but is reasonable to assume that an infantry regiment was organised into two battalions, each 500 to 650 strong. About a third of



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these would have carried a pike, and most of the others a matchlock musket. Uniforms could have been of any colour, the famous Russian green being only a twinkle in one of the tsar's ordinances, and due to the lack of supply different hues could be found within individual regiments. Overall quality was poor at best, apart from the two Guard regiments, who proved to be of far stronger stuff than the rest of the army. The Semenovski regiment wore a basically blue uniform, the Preobrazhenski, dark green. These units were numerically stronger than the line regiments, and may have had four or five battalions.

A final point to note to any would-be refighter of Narva: the Russian army may be very, very big, but at least you can press into action any spare tricorne-clad figures around without any problem of nationality – in the Russian army, any colour goes!

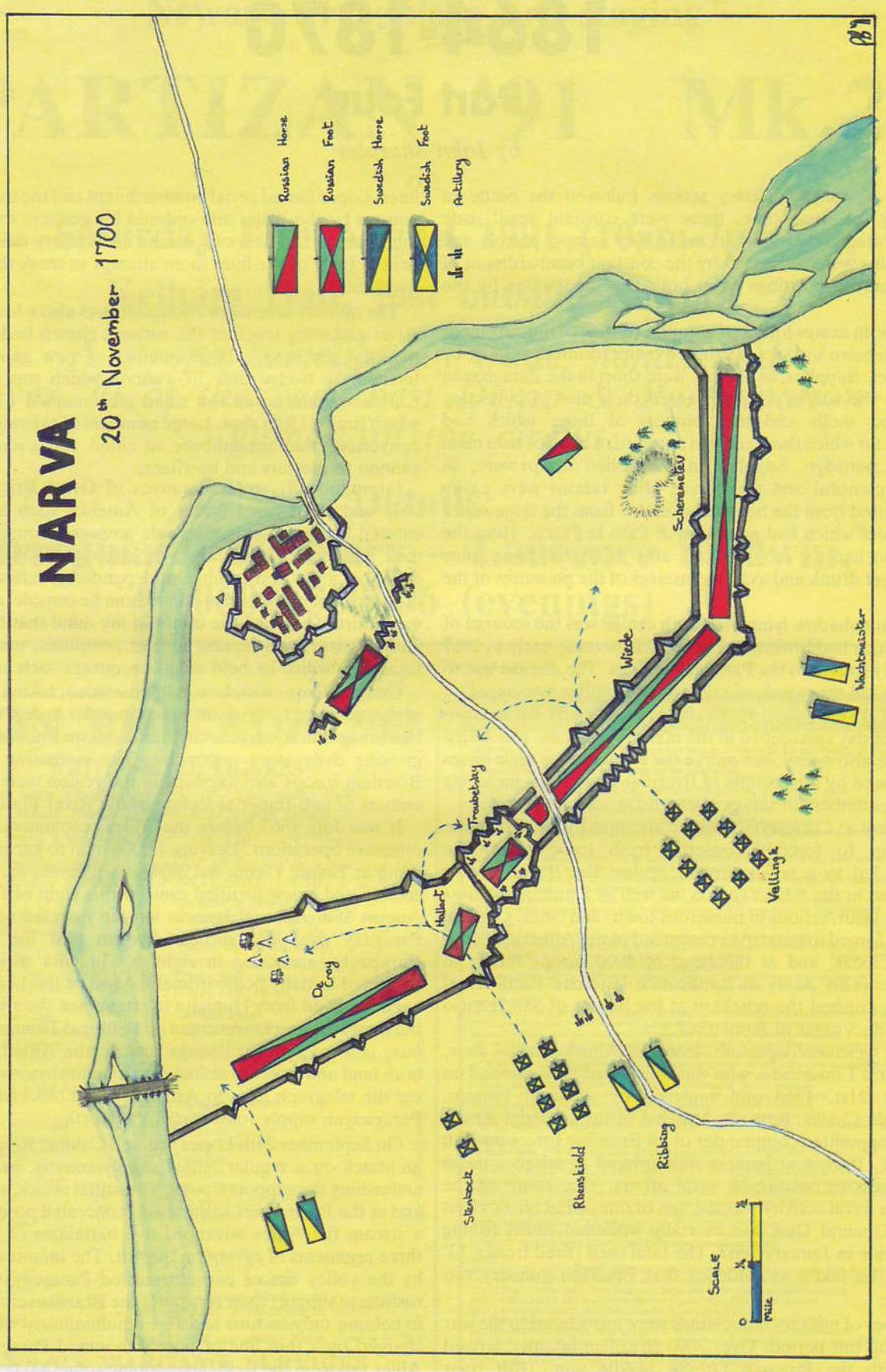
The Swedes

The organisation and appearance of the Swedes was dealt with in my previous articles in *Wargames Illustrated*. At Narva, battle was joined with 21 battalions of Foot, 48 troops of Horse and 39 guns. Theoretically, this would have meant that the Swedish army contained 12,600 infantry and 6,000 mounted troops. As the force totalled only 10,550 or so, this gives you some idea of the hardships suffered by the Swedes on the march to the battle. Incidentally, the presence of such a large number of artillery means that the Swedish player will have a very rare chance to use this arm of service. Despite its excellent quality, artillery proved of little use in the Carolean art of war, as it was too slow to keep up with the rapid and hard marches of the main field armies.



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