

# Wrapping up GZHATSK 20

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We have now wrapped up playtesting on **GZHATSK 20**, a project the playtest team began about three months ago. This is a bonus / expansion game for **BORODINO 20** that is included as part of the **NAPOLEONIC 20** Expansion Kit.

For those of you unfamiliar with *The Battle of Gzhatsk*, that's not surprising – it's a battle that never happened. However, Gzhatsk very nearly became the site of the climactic engagement of the 1812 campaign in Russia. Simply put, it's the battle that Borodino should have been – but wasn't, largely due to petty jealousies of the Russian commanders and Czarist court politics.

## About the Near-Battle of Gzhatsk

Gzhatsk had its near-brush with destiny in early September, 1812. After abandoning Smolensk (and barely avoiding disaster), General Barclay de Tolly was under enormous pressure to stop retreating and halt Napoleon before he reached Moscow. As the Russian armies fell back deeper into Russia, de Tolly sent out teams of officers to survey the countryside to find the best location to confront the French. After considering the alternatives, de Tolly finally settled on the area near the small town of Gzhatsk.



Barclay de Tolly

It was described by period sources as “the perfect battlefield.” Gzhatsk had a river to protect the Russian flanks, a long curving rise that provided both a superior defensive position and afforded excellent visibility of the surrounding countryside, and marshy ground to the rear to facilitate a retreat in the event the battle did not go as well as anticipated.

The Russians arrived at Gzhatsk about midday on 31 August and immediately began to fortify positions there. Late that afternoon, General Kutusov arrived to take command from de Tolly. After touring the area with his predecessor, Kutusov publicly proclaimed it was an excellent position and supported de Tolly's decision to make a stand at Gzhatsk. But during the night, members of Kutusov's retinue suggested that, should they manage to defeat the French at Gzhatsk, de Tolly could claim credit for the victory because the battle was fought on ground of *his* choosing.

Through the better part of the next day, while his men continued to dig in, Kutusov pondered the situation. Then, about mid-afternoon, he ordered the army to stop fortifying their position and resume withdrawing towards Moscow. Over the next four days the Russians fell back, stopping and starting to dig in again at several other possible battlefields, only to have Kutusov change his mind once more, declare that site

unsuitable, and order the retreat resumed. Finally, running out of options and with no other even remotely advantageous defensive location between where they were and Moscow, the army halted at Borodino, and the rest, as they say, is history...

## The Making of the Gzhatsk 20 Game

I originally came up with the idea for **GZHATSK 20** while doing research for development of Alan Emrich's **SMOLENSK 20** game. After reading the account about how Gzhatsk very nearly became the site of the decisive confrontation of the 1812 invasion of Russia, I thought it would be neat to see how a battle at that location might have looked. To my knowledge, no game had ever been done of this fascinating potential battle – but even more interesting to me was the opportunity this offered of being able to have the same two armies face each other on three different battlefields: Smolensk, Gzhatsk, and Borodino.

The biggest problem I faced with the initial design was a map: I was unable to find any period cartography of the area. In fact, at first I even had a heck of a time just finding where Gzhatsk was. Eventually, I found the name of the town had been changed in the late 1950s to Gagarin (in honor of the Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, who was born there). In the end, I created a map using a combination of *Google Earth* satellite imagery, interpolated terrain analysis from existing strategic scale Napoleonic games, and gut-instinct guesses based on the rather vague period accounts of the area that I was able to find. Given the information available, I feel confident that the map is a reasonably accurate depiction of what the area looked like in 1812. However, I'll also admit that a certain degree of designer's/developer's discretion may have been exercised in the interests of simply making a better game.



And that, when you get to the heart of it, is what good game development is all about: *play balance*. While I try very hard to remain as true as I can to the historical situation with all the games in the **NAPOLEONIC 20** Series, I also acknowledge that we occasionally tweak things to make the game work better. I don't view these games as detailed simulations (at least, not in the classic sense). There's nothing innately wrong with simulations, but if you enjoy that sort of thing, there are plenty of other more detailed games that can provide you with those sorts of exercises and the insights you can gain by performing them. The **NAPOLEONIC 20** Series, first and foremost, is about having fun. And to be fun, we try to ensure that both sides in our games have a reasonably decent chance of winning (or at least squeaking out a draw). We also want to ensure there aren't any egregiously absurd ploys either side can use which would unHINGE the historical story too much. And that is where playtesting comes in...

## Playtesting GZHATSK 20

We're exceptionally lucky to have an amazing group of dedicated and incredibly talented playtesters working for us. These guys and girls (yes, we've got a female playtester who works with us occasionally) put each of our games through its paces dozens of times, constantly checking to make sure rules and event cards are clearly worded, that the "story" each game tells is both compelling and flexible enough to avoid being repetitive, and that the action feels right according to the history of that battle or campaign. Most importantly, though, is the fact that the process is a team effort – we don't just have the playtesters submit AARs (After Action Reports) of their test games, we discuss impressions and decide what's working and what isn't working, and we don't deliver a game to Alan for publication until we all feel that it's ready.

Let me give you an example of how that relates specifically to **GZHATSK 20**. About halfway through the playtesting process I compiled a summary of game outcomes and shared it with the team. My statistics indicated that we had a roughly equal distribution of French and Russian wins, and a fair number of drawn games. To my mind, this was a good sign and indicated the game was reasonably balanced. But one of our playtesters, Anthony Nunziata, pointed out that almost every one of his test games had ended in a Russian victory – even more alarming was the fact that several of his Russian wins were blow outs (where the Russians would drive French morale down to zero before the game was half over).

**GZHATSK 20**

**Murat: le Beau Sabreur**  
The French **Reserve Cavalry** unit, if in play, receives +1 to both its Movement Allowance and Combat Strength this turn.

**Opolchenie**

Roll a die. On a  or  there is no effect; on a  or  you receive 1 Militia Reinforcement unit this turn. *Ignore this opportunity if all four Militia units are currently on the map.*

We tried to analyze what it was that Anthony's Russians were doing that was so different than everyone else's Russians. I also asked the other playtesters to try and use a Russian strategy and on-map tactics similar to the way Anthony was playing his Russians to see if they could duplicate his results. The data we got back from these experiments was interesting: while using Anthony's tactics did seem to improve the Russian side's chances, it was still nowhere near the totally one-sided set of outcomes that Anthony was getting. So we went back again and reviewed all of Anthony's AARs and discussed them at length until, at last, we figured out that he'd been interpreting one of the exclusive rules differently from the rest of us. That resulted in a tightening of the rule in question (to ensure that it was very clear what the intent was and the correct procedure to follow), but it also pointed out that using a slightly different tactical approach than the rest of us had been doing could yield a different set of average outcomes, and that in turn resulted in our adjusting some of the scenario setup criteria to make sure that a proper balance was maintained.

For my part, one of the things that I always try to do at the end of the playtesting process is to run one final **Blind Test** game. Typically, I look for someone who hasn't played that particular Napoleonic 20 game before, and preferably someone who's never played any game in the series at all (essentially, as complete a *n00b* as I can find), and then I play the game against that person. If that player can read and understand the game's exclusive

rules without a problem, and then hold their own against me in the game (not necessarily win, but at least not go down in a total blowout), then I feel comfortable in declaring the game “ready.”

Well, my opponent in the Blind Test game this time, Kevin McHale, fought me to a Sudden Death draw, and that’s was good enough for us to wrap up **GZHATSK 20**.  
*Onward to Moscow!*