

France. By Mike Watkins.

So, you have chosen to play France. A nation with an amazing army, the second best naval morale, a great strategic position, colonial holdings and with plenty of space but which only infrequently (in my experience) makes it into the end game. Hopefully these notes will help you get 'le patrié' off to a good start. Anything after that is in your hands.

Economy

France has everything it needs to run a competent economy. There are several bonus production areas, including for wool, food and horses. There are a few areas of arable land below the y 35 line which are also useful.

The only drawbacks are the mines. There is no gold mine and there is only one ore mine. Not only do you only have the one mine, but it is within reach of a sudden attack by Italy, the Rhine and Holland. An alternative source of ore, be it the ore mine by the Red Sea or one of the ore mines near France's start up positions in the colonies, is therefore vital.

Until France can rely upon a second source of ore it can only really support two factories. A sensible first build is therefore an ore mine, two factories, two weaving mills and five sheep farms. Next turn seven more sheep farms, any mines you have managed to acquire in the colonies, maybe a horse farm or two and the balance make up of estates. Third turn, 10 estates. Starvation must be avoided at all costs and you should look to have at least 10 estates for every million of population, and keep an eye on the level of your food.

The last point on the economy is that you will need money and more money to support your armies and fleets. Any spare population not used in building production sites or military units should be used to increase your population (so a couple of quarries are useful).

Brigades

As France you have access to one of the finest armies in the game. Your infantry are as cheap as anyone else's and they are as good or better than their opponents in combat. They are also the fastest in the game. The same is true of the cavalry and you have the cheapest artillery in the game. The Mounted Artillery in particular are about 25% better than the average (and cheaper than average as well). Not only are the standard units very good, but you also have access to Guard units. Only the Russian Grenadier Guards and the Prussian Avante Garde compare to the Old Guard, but the French are faster.

There is no unit as strong as fully trained Garde du Corps in melee, and they can also trade shots with most infantry and win. Having said all that, the core of your army should be made up of Grenadiers, supported by Tirailleur, Cuirassier, Dragoons and Mounted Artillery. The Guard units are nice luxuries, but you will need the bulk provided by other units to protect them until the time is right for them to be unleashed.

Navy

As historically, your navy will probably have to grow on whatever is left over after the demands of the army. Mastery of the seas is of little benefit if the enemy is in Paris. And the wealth available in the colonies can be matched and beaten by that on offer nearby in Western Europe.

When you can build ships I recommend building a healthy mix of large merchantmen and type 19's. They move at the same speed and should give you the greatest bang for your buck. The larger warships are a little slow and building smaller ships can be a large drain on resources. A few size class 1 and 2 ships are useful though, just to chase down enemy merchants.

Colonies

France starts with some small holdings in the Colonies. The position in the West Indies is slightly stronger than in India. In the Indies, France should initially look to secure Haiti and as much of America as the Spanish and Brits will let them. French Guyana has to be viewed as indefensible and it may be worth trading it to Portugal or Holland for land elsewhere or ships.

In India you have a strong squadron capable of sweeping many of the smaller colonial powers from the sea. However, the French possessions are not best placed for rapid expansion and France is unlikely to be able to spare the troops, ships and commanders from Europe to really dominate. A realistic objective is to simply retain the trade cities (so that there is a market for others to trade in) and try to secure at least one of the ore mines in SE Asia.

Strategy and Diplomacy

Although France has many strengths, it also has weaknesses. One is that it can not develop its strategy as the game progresses. France has four nations on her borders, another two who can descend upon her shores and three more who can easily reach French territory. From the start you need to have decided upon your plan, and then pursue it. Before the first turn is in you should have some idea about

who will be your first victim. Ideally by the time you strike you should have stripped him of his allies, been assured peace on your other fronts and have a willing ally or two to help with the attack. And then strike hard and fast so that your main field army is available to meet any who would seek to take advantage of your distraction.

Of your immediate neighbours Spain has the weakest army. However, it is a large nation and could tie you down for months while others prepare to invade from the East. Holland, the Rhine and Italy have better armies but are more vulnerable to quick strikes and losing even small tracts of land. They also tend to have more neighbours willing to join you in your attack.

You will need to start talking to almost everyone from the start of the game and then keep on talking. The powers further away can be used to either help dismember those closer or as useful threats to keep your neighbours quiet. Also remember that you can offer things to sweeten the deal. The Dutch are short of woodland. The offer of lumber in return for the money to build the camps and other costs helps your economy while making the Dutch reliant upon you and friendly. French Guyana, plus a little whispering, may be enough to persuade Portugal to attack Spain allowing you in the back door.

In short, France is not for the passive. Russia, Turkey, Morocco or Britain can all sit back and watch in isolation. France does not have this luxury. You have a fine army, a competent navy, a large population and a starting position that will allow you bestride Europe, and maybe the world, or result in your early departure from the game, attacked on all sides.