

A FRENCH OPENING: THE BURGUNDY TIPOFF

By Mark Berch

You as France face a greater diversity of openings than any other player. If you are firmly set with an ally (or two) and a target, the choice is usually a fairly straightforward business. But if you are uncommitted for Spring 1901, and most players are, it can be a complicated mess. In such a case, however, there is one opening which I consider to be among the most overlooked and underrated in Diplomacy. The initial moves are: F Bre-Mid, A Par-Pic, A Mar-Bur.

It is a defining characteristic of this opening that you inform Germany early on that you will be going to Burgundy in Spring 1901 without support. That is the "TIPOFF" part of the opening. It should go no later than the third communication, and ideally no later than the second. Don't mention which army will be making the move, and don't tell even if you are asked. Tell the German player that seeing a German army in Burgundy in Spring 1901 is the worst possible calamity that can befall France. When this happens, France seldom can recover. You just can't afford to take that risk. This is an eminently plausible position to take because it is quite true. GA Bur is much more dangerous than EF Eng or IA Pie. It borders so much, and it makes France look crippled from the start.

Alternatively tell him how you as Germany had once slipped into Burgundy in S01 and what fun that turned out to be! Of course, this doesn't have to be the least bit true. You just need to demonstrate a well founded fear of GA Bur. But at the same time, tell him that he should feel free to stand you out if he wants because your essential requirement is to guard the province, not necessarily to occupy it. Make it clear that you don't care a whit whether he stands you out or he doesn't, and that he doesn't need to even bother telling you what his plans are. The fact that you don't care whether you enter Bur should alleviate German anxiety. The fact that you aren't asking him what he'll do should allay any fears that he is being manipulated.

Indeed, he may not want to take the tactical risk of telling you the truth about his plans, and may not want to take the diplomatic risk of lying to you. If he believes you, he may even draw some psychological comfort from the fact that he possesses more knowledge than you do. And the truth of the matter is, you can be content with either German choice, and you don't need to know in advance what Germany will do. So be low key about the whole discussion of what he does. I've been stood out and been let in, but only once was I ever told in advance, and he lied!

One advantage that this diplomatic stance has is that it should make a GI or EG S01 attack a little less likely. Germany usually (not always) agrees to these with at least a modest hope that he will be able to get into Burgundy in S01. With that hope gone, an IG or EG attack may seem less promising, as Germany understands that his ally will get into France sooner than he.

The game has two branches: Spring 1901 finds you in Mar or in Bur. In the former case, if the coast is clear, you can next glide into Spain for the build. In this way, the army in Mar really does work both seasons. This is often not that case for A Mar in S01. Players often move to Spain in S01 and just sit there in the Fall, eating tapas. Or they provide support for A Par-Bur, when that support isn't needed, making the French player look either a tad overaggressive or a little paranoid.

With Spa and Por squared away, your army in Picardy has a slightly freer hand in Belgium with that German army still in Mun than you would with Ger A Ruhr. Depending on where the German fleet is, Germany will have either no say at all about Belgium, or no more say than you. That is, the southern army in S01 has kept the western Germany army away from your new A Pic, giving it a freer hand. If England is in the Channel, you've reaped a major benefit from this opening. Picardy is the best place to be when faced with hostile England --- far better than Burgundy, because A Pic can cover Bre, and A Bur cannot. Also, if matters turn dark with Germany after S01, and you decide you need to cover Bur with A Pic, it's much better to do the standoff from Pic than from Par, because that way, both Par and Mar will be open for builds.

If Italy is in Pie, then life is more complicated. Then you'll really wish you were in Spa, so that you'd have at least the chance of guessing correctly with Italy. Still, Italy won't be helped by this turn of events. There's no Germany ally in Bur, and there's no chance that France will gamble on A Spa H and hope for the best, because there is no A Spa. A Mar is just going to hold, period. However, F Lon-Eng is much more common than A Ven-Pie (at least, it was when I was still active), so this is a reasonable tradeoff of risks. Still, if you're getting bad vibes from Italy but all seems cool with England, you'll need to consider whether this is really the right environment for such an opening.

The other branch is that you get into Bur, in most cases with A Mun-Ruhr. This yields a much more complex setup. You now don't get two Iberian builds, altho you gain the option of taking Spain with Spa(sc). Your second build will have to be Belgium --- or Munich. On the other hand, if you have no problems with Italy or England, a second build isn't all that vital even if you can't take either Bel or Mun. And of course, there's always the possibility of getting both if Germany runs into real conflict in the east in S01. Still, even ignoring Munich, you should be odds on favorite to take Belgium, especially if there is no fleet in Hol or Eng. If you think that Germany will be spooked enough to cover Mun, you might even land up in Bel and Ruhr. If Italy enters Pie, you're in similar situation as the other branch. You can guard Mar, but Spain is now out of reach for the army. You have the slight advantage that if there really is a standoff in Mar, you'll be able to build there, something not possible in the other branch. The problem comes if S01 brings F Lon-Eng. You still have A Pic for guard duty, but that second build will now be hard to come by, since you don't have the easy grab of Spain.

Relations with Germany should be good either way. You'll get a point for honesty when the results are read, for you did what you said. Germany can't complain about where your army is, since she selected the spot, and she may even feel in control for having determined this. Of the two branches, I prefer the first. Your pieces have all done something useful and are all properly placed to move again in F01 if circumstances permit. If all goes well, you'll get two builds plus a say in the Belgium story. In short, this is a splendid opening for a French player who doesn't want to commit too early, and who wants to guard against a German incursion while staying on good terms with Germany. Give it a try!