

DOLCHSTOSS - A HUNDRED ISSUES YOUNG

by Greg Hawes

Dolchstoss first appeared on the thirtieth birthday of its esteemed editor, and was named after one of Richard's press release characters, Dolchstoss von Hinten (German roughly translated in the vernacular as "stab in the back"). The first issue was a single foolscap sheet typed on his Adler portable. This was eventually superseded by the trusty IBM Executive, which has of course just given way to the onset of Technology. Just wait until he gets his first unreadable floppy disk - the Executive will soon be back! The famous neo-Gothic logo, designed by Richard's sister Barbi, appeared on issue IX and has remained ever since, the exceptions being issues XXVII, XXVIII, 39, 41 and 52. The foolscap formula continued to issue XXVI: with issue XXVII Dolchstoss "went litho".

Issues I to XXXII were numbered in Roman numerals, but Richard ran out of Letraset Xs then and had to be content with 33. Issues XVIII to XX carried the NGC elections for a committee of nine: this was Richard's idea originally and over the next 2-3 years was something of a flop. I served on one committee myself and I suspect Richard would shudder at the prospect of a repeat performance. As was later remarked, the committee organisation of the hobby just doesn't work.

Issue XXIII was a classic: the repercussions of the British clean-up in the meaningless Calhamer Awards (American-sourced) began to be felt, and the NGC card school's first meeting was reported: "the only big pot Glyn Palmer looked like getting was the one under his belt". Many of us have cause to thank Brian Yare and Dave Allen for their later contributions to the hobby Poker school, though a major scandal broke when Howell Davies welsed on a poker debt.

Over the years, Dolchstoss went through several stages: as a subzine to Victor Ludorum (or was it the other way round?); hosting the Glyn Palmer masterpiece "anonymous" column Fiat Lux, orphaned from Filibuster and upsetting a lot of readers; the Jubilee issue (no. 54); and to me its heyday - the pre-fold 60s issues. The cover of issue 59, depicting a scene from Verdi's Macbeth - in which the hero is crouched on bended knee and the heroine is berating his left ear, with the caption "For the last time, Wink, are you coming to bed?" was a hobby masterpiece, referring to Linda Thompson's reaction to Wink's propensity to Poker losses at ScotDipCon. For some reason I have two copies of that issue.

With issue 69 Dolchstoss died. Issue 70 appeared almost 5 years later with a practically unchanged editorial style, despite the fact that Richard had undergone extreme trauma and change in his personal life. The highlight of this interregnum for me was his wedding day with Bron: best con I ever attended, with the slight drawback that they ended it still unwed!

Dolchstoss is undoubtedly still a cornerstone of the UK Diplomacy hobby (as is its ageing editor). Despite a long break in the middle of his publishing career, Richard has managed to produce a zine, remarkable for many different reasons, regularly and reliably for thirteen and a half years. What is it about Dolchstoss that has made it such an interesting and enjoyable read for so long? To my mind it's a combination of many factors.

First and foremost, Dolchstoss is a postal Diplomacy zine. Richard has himself stated often in the zine that Dolchstoss would not exist without postal Diplomacy games. The games themselves have always been of a high standard, and often remarkable in their own right. One of Richard's old customs has been the claiming of so-called Dolchstoss records - for example in issue XXII he claimed that if Germany in BDC11 had ordered A(Lon)-Wal in Autumn 1909 he would have prevented the Turkish F(BLA)-Con - quite a standoff chain!

Variants have featured prominently - I enjoyed BDC 86V (Youngstown) immensely as Austria, though the Youngstown Variant itself has since been surpassed in popularity by Doug Wakefield's much superior Mercator. Variants of Richard's own design have predominated more recently: Diplomacy was intended as a joke but turned out surprisingly good; Vain Rats is popular, and the recent Superbourse interesting. Richard also had a hand in designing Third Age II (and now III), which he's also GM'd.

Diplomacy hasn't been Richard's only joy, though. Dolchstoss spent much of it's first incarnation as House Zine of the National Games Club, (and before that of the British Diplomacy Club), carrying sizeable chess and Scrabble columns as well as that excrescence Battleground - the NGC wargames subzine - and reports of Formula I games.

From issues 56-69 Richard wrote the famous "introduction to Acol" series on which a generation of us hobby Bridge players have based the development of our bidding styles. The Bridge column has always been a feature of Dolchstoss and one which I enjoy more than any other part of the zine. Not all his readers have shared this view: many a letter column in past years carried pleas for its removal.

Richard's Diplomacy strategy articles, and his contributions to opening theory, have always made interesting reading. They've certainly had a lasting effect on the openings statistics: the Russian Octopus and the Austrian Southern Hedgehog leaped in popularity after he had argued their case.

The Dolchstoss Christmas Quiz is a real and enduring challenge year after year, though I fear that Richard is finding it harder and harder to set the questions. Richard has been a prominent figure at Diplomacy conventions, too, and his con reports have always been anecdotal and amusing. The Ronson report in issue 63 reminded me vividly of the ferocious Preston curry that burnt right through Richard's front teeth: his falsies have been a butt of hobby humour ever since.

Finally, the reason for the success and longevity of Dolchstoss has been Richard's fluent command of English and his dry sense of humour. His knack for spotting "one-liners" is phenomenal: when Glyn Palmer's late father (an excellent Gentleman, missed by all who met him) bemoaned the fact that he had to leave the pub to go to his daughter's wedding, Richard expressed surprise that a member of the Palmer clan should get married during licensed hours. Palmer pere replied gloomily: "Ah, well, y'see - she's marrying outside t'family."

Long may Dolchstoss continue to bring us pleasure. My subscription for one will never lapse. As a non-smoker, of course, I can always renew with duty-free Gauloises rolling tobacco...