

## A FOND FRIENDSHIP RENEWED

Re-Acquainting Oneself with *THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN*

By Art Kritzer

There are very few games that combine simplicity with challenging play, time after time. Fewer still become classics, and remain so years after their initial release. Rediscovering one of these gems is akin to meeting an old chum. For those who have played *THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN*, I need go no further. Despite endless playings, this game continues to be one of my all time favorites, and I continue to enjoy it immensely. Recently, I had the "pleasure" (more about those quotation marks later) of playing this classic with an old gaming buddy of mine named Paul. We wanted something quick to play, and TRC's six-page rule book fit the bill nicely.

With more than a little re-kindled interest, my old and rather tattered copy of TRC was dusted off and set up for play. Old strategies and tactics began coming back to me to be tried once more. What was most surprising was how much we actually *enjoyed playing the game* — there is no lack of eastern front games out there, but TRC had lost none of its appeal for me over the years I had been away from it. Everything was there: The Panzers, the Stukas, the Russian Guards, the Cavalry and the good old pesky Russian Partisans. Great gaming was at hand! My friend took a break and I glanced through the rule booklet (remember when all rules came in "booklets" rather than full-fledged "books"?). Since we had only one extended evening to play, the full campaign game was out. That left us with one or two scenarios — but which scenarios?

First pick was obviously the good old 1941 Barbarossa Campaign. As I recalled, the Germans always had great fun with this one. Three Stuka counters, endless encirclements, sweeping Panzer advances and countless beautiful Russian cities waiting to be taken. The only question remaining was where to strike Panzer-terror into the Russian hordes? As for the Russians, the only factor in their game plan was delay, delay, and more delay. Sacrificial units were an essential part of their game plan. More importantly, the Russians had Generals Mud and Winter, crafty Partisans and potent Siberian forces waiting in the wings to save the day. Yep, this scenario has it all. Still, the others warranted our consideration, as well.

All the 1942 scenarios featured a much stronger Russian opponent. The May/June scenario, for example, offers plenty of German offensive possibilities, but the German player would not be able to attack all along the front (every Russophile's heart bleeds at that, I'm sure). In fact, by virtue of their set-up, the Russians could pretty much determine where the Germans would strike. But despite lacking the Teutonic flair of the Barbarossa Scenario, this one did allow both players the chance to fight for Moscow.

By now, our game-clock was running, and a decision had to be made. We decided to play more than one scenario for the evening, and somehow managed to

agree on a seldom-played one: 1944, with Berlin as the focus. We rolled off for sides, but as usual I was the Russians and Paul would be the Germans.

Now, a quick glance at the scenario force mix will show that the Russian enjoys tremendous advantages in this scenario, so in my best diplomatic fashion, I let it be known that the determination of a "winner" for the evening's gaming would be based on the best of two matches, with the Russian level of victory to be the determinant for the overall winner. In complete modesty, my opponent declared that he would "make a good show of an otherwise bad situation."

For myself, I just loved the prospect of steam-rolling over the Germans; Paul had always seemed to get the better of me in past contests. I was not about to let that happen this time. Wistful fantasies of *Operation Bagration* danced through my mind — I thought nothing of the evil gleam in Paul's eye at the time.

Never mind that I could barely recall those aforementioned tactics and strategies for TRC. Nevertheless, I felt sufficiently confident to place the bulk of my armor near Smolensk and the mountain area just east/southeast of Lwow. Heck, I even threw a few armies into the swamps just south of Mink. To deceive my opponent, a sizeable force of three Guards Infantry and two Armor went into hexes W23, X24 and Y23 (just east of the Dnestr River). The plan was to strike for Minsk, Brest and Lwow before moving on to Warsaw and Berlin; everything else was to be bypassed or ignored completely.

Reviewing my dispositions, I could see that a German rout was inevitable. My only concern was to maintain my concentration and not get sloppy. I anticipated no difficulties for Comrade Stalin's forces.

Well, I was in trouble right off the bat. Rather than fight, Paul withdrew the bulk of his forces to the Neuman River line. In the south, he anchored his front on the Dnestr/Bug River lines. The effect of all this was that it took me two turns to reposition my forces sufficiently to mount anything worthy of the term "assault". Even more depressing was the fact that it took *another* turn before the bulk my sloth-like army reached the front line.

Still, I was, confident that I could recover. After a turn of massive assaults, the Neuman was crossed. Winter was fast approaching, and I looked forward to my vast replacements capacity to offset the consequences of multiple 2-to-1 and 1-to-1 attacks. As well, I anticipated a glorious Soviet paratroop drop to help break the new German line forming near the Vistula. But, as with any wargame which eventually earns the name of classic, TRC has its own surprises in store.

On the January/February Turn, I was ready. The slow but steady German losses were about to increase dramatically; Paul was simply running out of troops. In the

south, he opted to leave most of his area open, tempting me to advance. But I had other plans, and quickly releasing the German Balkan Garrison was not among them.

Filled with confidence, I continued. After losing four armies (two of them Guards), Königsberg fell. Soon I would be assaulting Warsaw, and in the works was an all-out assault on every German unit from the Baltic Sea to the Hungarian border. Painstaking planning was called for. All attacks were calculated and re-calculated down to the last factor. Special emphasis was placed on crossing the Vistula River north and south of Warsaw. Hexes J27, K26, M26, N26 and O27 were about to change hands. Cocky, you say? Overweening ambition? Nay, for my ace-in-the-hole was to be my *Desantniki*, the glorious Soviet paratrooper corps! Their landings behind the German lines would eliminate any hope of escape for the Fascist hordes. I rubbed my hands in villainous glee; all was in order.

You know, you really shouldn't go such a long time without playing these games; TRC in particular. Things which are comically obvious when you play once a week (or even once a month) attain a soil of rosy, nostalgic hue with the distance of years. In a way, it's sort of like learning the game all over again, with the added humiliation of knowing you would never have made the same mistakes if you'd only kept your hand in over the years.

For there, sitting in Moscow and directing the glorious advance of the Red Army — as it had been since the beginning of the game — was my STAVKA unit. You know; the unit from which the paratroopers must trace their range when executing an airdrop (said range being a mere eight hexes). The same unit that moves only once, in the second impulse of a turn, and which cannot use Rail Movement. The unit which would, therefore, be at least three turns getting into position to activate the paratroops, by which time it would be summer and the war (or at least, the game) would be over.

Now, I know none of you have ever done this in a game of TRC. And true, some gamers would just say: "Oh, sure, go ahead, put that STAVKA unit up where it belongs, old buddy. I know you meant to do that." But I had too much pride to ask for a break, and anyway, Paul just smiled.

Still, all was not lost! My big attacks could still pull it off. The two most important die-rolls centered on Warsaw's adjacent hexes. And in all probability, the Germans would be pushed back and suffer casualties all along the front. But since Paul had retreated his forces so far back

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early in the game, his stacks were formidable. In addition, the release of the Warsaw garrison gave the Germans defending stacks with a twelve-combat-point average. Nevertheless, I clenched my jaw and rolled the die.

By the end of the first impulse, the law of averages had turned against me. The die gave me nothing but ones and twos, and I got nowhere fast. Worse still, the Russian spearheads were forced to attack Warsaw at poor odds in the second impulse, and suffered mightily for it. At the end of the turn, Warsaw had not liberated and German casualties amounted to a single 4-4 infantry unit. For the Russians, Berlin seemed very far away.

Paul took mercy on me and offered to end it right there, but I of course had too much pride, remember? And so, refusing to quit, I fought on for another turn-and-a-half despite continuing humiliation. Besides, Paul had earned the right to see his defense through to victory. I was so desperate I even made 1-to-2 and 1-to-3 attacks into the Hungarian mountains; predictably, this forlorn tactic led to disaster, and at the end of the March/April turn, I resigned. Paul, ever the diplomat, graciously pointed out my errors and strategic blunders and offered his suggestions as to how they might be rectified. Like I could really use the help now, right?

Anyway — mercifully — we didn't play the rematch, but played something else for the remainder of the evening, as I chafed at the memory of such a rout — and at the hands of an inferior opponent! Even though I managed to win a few bouts of an ancient wargame later in the evening, my mind remained with *TRC*. I had to find a way to do better.

And so, for the past few weeks, THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN has occupied a lot of my free time. Forgotten strategies have been reawakened, overlooked tactics have been tested, and buried rules have been reviewed. While writing this account of my reintroduction to this classic, I have often stopped to move Panzers and Guards about the mapboard. It is November/December 1943, and a vast armor duel has just ended in stalemate to the east of Rostov. And as I continue to play, my thoughts center on a re-match with my buddy Paul. After all the time apart this fast-moving, easy-learned, always entertaining game of the eastern front has gotten me hooked just as surely as it did the first time I played it.

Welcome back, old friend.