

Considering that Second World War Russian games make up the most popular section of SPI's range, it is surprising that "the world's greatest tank battle" has had to wait so long. Still, it has arrived — after many reports in "Outgoing Mail". These reports mentioned that the "PanzerGruppe Guderian" system had been discarded as inappropriate for this battle, so I was quite interested in seeing how the game turned out. At first sight however, it looks much the same as other SPI games.

The map is the standard 22" by 34" and covers the area around Kursk at 10 Km to the hex. This allows various famous landmarks to be incorporated including the cities of Roslavl, Orel (Oryol is what it should be, I think), Kursk and of course Kharkov — the most fought-over city in the history of wargaming! The map is covered with the now familiar bright colours of recent SPI games — green splodges for woods, blue lines for rivers and roads (NB Panzers drive on roads *only*), brown slopes and black railway lines, all overlaid with masses and masses of red and blue triangles (dragon's teeth) marking the opposing sides' entrenchments. Incidentally, the terrain effects chart does not make clear that any hex containing a dragon's tooth symbol is an entrenchment hex, as well as having one or more dragon's teeth hexsides. This is important as defending troops get a bonus for being in an entrenchment hex and another one for being attacked across dragon's teeth hexsides.

The pieces are colourful too. The units are German Divisions (plus the two battalions of Heavy Tank Destroyers without which no game of this battle would be complete) and Russian Corps (Corpses?) and Divisions. These are grouped into Corps (German) and Armies (Russian) which are then grouped into Armies (German) and Fronts (Russian). The counters of each German Army and each Russian Front are a different colour — shades of grey and green for the Germans and red, pink and orange for the Russians. This means that it is immediately obvious which formations are where and which formation a unit belongs to. Armoured/Mechanised units are also obvious as they have a band of a different colour across the bottom third to half of the counter. My only complaint about this system is that some of the German armour units in different formations use the same pair of colours — in a different order — which makes them difficult to tell apart at first glance. As well as the units, there are markers for signifying various things. These include step loss markers for the larger infantry units which do not have counters for every step. There are also two deployment displays for units to be laid out in their formations and, as usual, two copies of the charts and tables. These latter include a section called "Miscellaneous Information" which contains odd bits and pieces of the rules that one normally forgets. I found this a great help, especially when playing the game for the first time, so please repeat it, SPI

The Sequence of Play is reassuringly familiar: after an (optional) Air War phase, the German player kicks off, his turn consisting of; Administrative phase; Movement phase; Combat phase (Gun segment and two Combat segments); Mechanised Movement phase; Disruption Removal phase and Organisation phase. The Russian player then has his turn, made up of the same phases, to complete the game turn.

The Air War allows either or both players to try to intercept the opposition's aircraft. If this is successful, the two sides shoot it out; surviving aircraft or unintercepted ones are then available for ground attack in the Combat phase.

The Administrative phase introduces the first new concept — modes (this is a more complicated version of what was used in "Operation Star"). During this phase both players decide which mode to place their units in. This is done by Headquarters — each unit in a formation is in the mode of its HQ. There are three modes: Assault; Mobile and Static (units may also be Disrupted as a result of overrun). All the modes have advantages and disadvantages with the exception of Disrupted which is just a disadvantage. Assault mode allows a unit to attack in both combat segments, but halves movement and prohibits overruns. Mobile mode allows units their full movement allowance and allows them to overrun, but they may only attack in the first combat segment. Static mode gives defending units an advantage when attacked, but units in Static mode cannot attack and may only move half of their movement allowance. Mode can also affect combat. Some combat results contain the letter M, rather than a slash, separating the attacker's and defender's combat results. In these cases, the attacker's and defender's losses are increased by one if the attacker is in Assault mode and the Defender in Static, and reduces them by one if both sides are in Mobile mode. Obviously, it is very important to get units into the right mode. This also places a premium on planning since you have to know what you're going to do in order to decide which units to put into which mode. Woe betide the player who forgets what he'd planned to do or who changes his mind halfway through his turn! As mode is governed by HQ, rather than by individual units, players have a good reason to keep formations together and use them as a group, rather than scattering them along the front line piecemeal.

Movement follows orthodox principles: each unit has a movement allowance and expends points as it moves from hex to hex, different terrain costing different amounts to enter or pass through. The observant reader will have noticed that no mention has yet been made of supply considerations. This is because supply for movement purposes is judged for each individual unit when it begins to move. This does away with all the "Out of Supply" markers. However it does allow some interesting manoeuvres, such as moving HQ's up to the front in order to put units back into supply before moving them. As normal, Supply is traced to HQ's and thence to a 'friendly' map edge via roads and railways. Out of supply units have their movement allowance halved — attack strength is also halved if units are out of supply at the instant of combat.

Rail movement is allowed, but is very limited. Both players are only allowed to move five units per turn on their own side of the start line. Furthermore, only two units may pass through a given single-track railway hex and no more than four through a double-track hex in one turn. It therefore becomes quite difficult to move large formations by rail, especially when you want to preserve their integrity.

Other points about movement include the German player's ability to 'infiltrate' — i.e. move directly from one enemy-controlled hex to another. This gives the Germans a means of rolling up lines of entrenchments from the side, once an initial breach has been made. While on the subject of movement I must not forget overruns (as if anyone could). Units stacked together and in Mobile mode may attempt to overrun enemy stacks in the movement phase. Overrun is fought like normal combat, except that any defending units that retreat are disrupted. Disrupted units may not move nor attack, have no zone of control and are at a disadvantage if attacked. Zones of control, by the way, can be exited at a cost in movement points.

Stacking is limited by stacking points. Up to six stacking points can be in the same hex. Russian Corps have a stacking value of three, HQ's, Kampfgruppen and Divisions have two and everything else one, except Russian artillery, anti-tank and Partisan units which have zero. The result of all this is that you can put two Corps or three Divisions in one hex.

KURSK

HISTORY'S GREATEST TANK BATTLE

JULY 1943

PAUL EVANS



Enough of this, let's move on to Combat. This is on a slightly different basis from normal. The attacker adds up his points in the normal way; the defender does not. The number of attacking points gives a column on the Combat Results Table which is then shifted left (in the defender's favour) or right (in the attacker's favour) to take account of terrain, mode etc. The die is then thrown and modified according to the number of defending steps. The more steps, the greater the modifier and the worse the result for the attacker. The result is the number of losses for both attacker and defender. These may be taken as steps lost or as hexes retreated — although there are limitations on how far a unit may be retreated. This is pretty straightforward, if a little different from usual. It does have the effect of stopping odds counting (he's got 7 points doubled so I need 42 points to get 3:1). The attacker simply piles in what he's got available (up to 72 points anyway), tries to get as many column shifts in his favour as possible and hopes for the best! There is then a second combat segment for anyone who's survived the first and wants another go and is in Assault mode.

The situation is somewhat more complicated by the presence of anti-tank and artillery units. These are only separate units for the Russian player — German anti-tank and artillery points are built in to their HQ's, reflecting the differing doctrines in the two armies. As a result the rules are slightly different for the two players. First of all, anti-tank fire is resolved in the Gun segment of the Combat phase, before either Combat segment. For the Russians, any defending stack that contains an anti-tank unit may fire it. This is just like normal combat with only the anti-tank unit(s) attacking and any losses on the defender are taken in armoured units first (bye, bye, Panzers!) — only the attacking anti-tank unit can be lost on the other side (and generally is). Artillery units affect combat by reducing the attacker's strength by the strength of the artillery unit(s) — this is halved against just armoured units. Artillery can also be used to barrage in support of an attack — adding its strength to the other attacking units — and there is an optional rule allowing counter-battery fire. German anti-tank and artillery points work in the same way, but may be parcelled out between any units stacked with or adjacent to the HQ. This

gives the German player an incentive to put his Headquarters in the front line where he can use their firepower, but where they are also vulnerable to counter-attacks. Russian HQ's have no firepower, no combat strength and no zones of control — they are simply administrative units through which supply is channelled. As a result Russian HQ's are generally kept back from the front line where they are safer — unless the Germans manage to break through!

For all aficionados of PGG et al, there is the reassuring sight of some untried units. However, these units — Russian Divisions — have a standard untried strength and at least one step — when flipped over they reveal a new strength which may be as much as the original strength! There is also a Mechanised movement phase. This gives the armour a chance to move again and exploit any gaps opened up by the fighting. This is followed by the Disruption removal phase. At this point any units disrupted by overruns in the previous movement phases are restored to full health.

The last phase of each player turn is the Organisation phase. This covers quite a few odds and ends. Replacement steps are brought on to bolster up battered units — the German player can even do this in enemy zones of control. Units may also be placed into Independent Command or Alternative Subordination. Independent Command means that units are not tied to any HQ — which frees them of some supply considerations — but they cannot attack. This can be a way of getting mobile troops to exploit any breakthroughs, but its uses are somewhat limited. Alternate Subordination means that a unit reports to a different HQ from the one printed on the counter. Both sides are strictly limited in the number of units that can be in Independent Command or Alternate Subordination at any one time. Units may also be broken down and recombined. The German player changes Infantry Divisions for Kampfgruppen or vice versa, the Russian swaps Rifle Corps and Rifle Divisions.

No game of the East Front would be complete without some Russian partisans. This game is no exception. As usual they simply mooch around in the German rear, trying to interfere with his supply. The German player can detach security units from the front line to go and deal with them. There is one more rule that needs to be mentioned and that is Russian reserves. At the start of each scenario certain Russian formations are designated as reserves. This means that they cannot

move or attack until they have been activated. The Russian player can activate a given number of reserve formations in each game turn and more if the German is doing well. Reserves are also activated if attacked. However, each reserve formation activated by the Russian player gives the German a victory point. Regardless of how they were activated, each active reserve formation gives the German player one victory point per turn and a bonus at the end of the game. This makes the reserves rather a double-edged tool for the Russian. He needs to activate sufficient reserves to stem the German assault, but, if he activates too many, the German is getting victory points on a plate, and if he activates too few he is not going to be able to stop the Germans short of Stalingrad (no, that's not on the map). So, if you intend playing Russian, brush up on your cost-benefit analysis!

Apart from the activated reserves, the players get victory points for the usual good deeds — eliminating enemy units and capturing geographical objectives. The level of victory depends on the difference between the two sides' points — generally the attacking side has to do a lot better to win decisively. I say attacking side because in one of the three scenarios the Russians are on the offensive! The three scenarios cover the historical battle, in July, the Russian offensive in August and the original German High Command plan to attack in May — which Hitler would not allow as he wanted the attack to wait for the new Panther tanks. The May scenario sees the German troops looking much the same as in July, but the Russians are without many of the reserves and nearly half of the entrenchments that were present in July. The German player thus has a rather easier time of it, but he needs more victory points to win. The



[13.7] AIR WARFARE RESULT TABLE (Optional)

Number of Attacking Air Points

Attacker	1	2	3	4	5	6
Defender	1	1	1	1	1	1
Defender	2	2	2	2	2	2
Defender	3	3	3	3	3	3
Defender	4	4	4	4	4	4
Defender	5	5	5	5	5	5
Defender	6	6	6	6	6	6
Defender	7	7	7	7	7	7
Defender	8	8	8	8	8	8
Defender	9	9	9	9	9	9
Defender	10	10	10	10	10	10

The results to the left of the slash apply to the attacking Air Points; the results to the right apply to the defending Air Points. A "0" after a slash indicates that the attacking Air Point is destroyed. A "0" after a slash indicates that the defending Air Point is destroyed. A "0" after a slash indicates that the attacking Air Point is destroyed. A "0" after a slash indicates that the defending Air Point is destroyed.

[118.19] INDICATOR LETTERS KEY

Unit	May	July	August
In Play	Off Play	In Play	Off Play
A	X		
B		X	
C			X
D	X		
E		X	
F			X
G	X		
H		X	
I			X
J	X		
K		X	
L			X
M	X		
N		X	
O			X
P	X		
Q		X	
R			X
S	X		
T		X	
U			X
V	X		
W		X	
X			X

[118.5] MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION TABLE

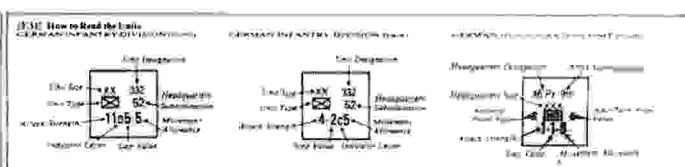
5.1.1. General Rules for the Game. The game is played on a map of the Eastern Front during the Battle of Kursk. The game is played on a map of the Eastern Front during the Battle of Kursk. The game is played on a map of the Eastern Front during the Battle of Kursk.

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[9.92] STEP DIE-ROLL MODIFIERS TABLE

Die Modifier	Number of Defending Steps
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6
7	7
8	8
9	9
10	10

[9.91] COMBAT RESULT TABLE

Attacker	Defender	Result
1	1	1
2	2	2
3	3	3
4	4	4
5	5	5
6	6	6
7	7	7
8	8	8
9	9	9
10	10	10

August scenario is rather spoiled by the special rules which I assume are there to give the Russian player a chance. The prime example of this is the rule that if the German player makes more attacks than the number of the game turn (i.e. one in game turn one, two in game turn two etc), the extra attacks suffer a column shift of four columns in the defender's favour. I can see it now: "No, no, Field Marshal, this is August 3rd - you can only attack two Russian Corps!". What this seems to mean is that the game as it stands is biased towards German attackers and Russian defenders and therefore needs modification if the Russians are on the offensive. This rather spoils the August scenario.

There is one other piece of innovation in connection with the scenarios, and that is the use of code letters to denote which scenario a unit is present in, whether on the map, or as reinforcements and at what strength. Each unit counter has one or more code letters. The letter(s) says which scenario(s) the unit is used in and whether it is on the map or a reinforcement. The unit is at the strength shown on that face of the counter - a unit can have different letters on different sides showing that it is at different strengths in different scenarios. This makes it easy enough to look up a particular unit's code letter(s) and discover which scenario(s) it takes part in. However, it is a bit more difficult to pick out which units are required for a scenario as there are a minimum of fourteen letters to look for and they could be on any of the counters or faces of a unit. So, while this does save space in the rules (as you don't need a section saying where each unit goes), I don't think it is a great improvement over present systems.

So much for the rules, now to describe what the game is like to play. For this purpose I am going to stick to the historical, July, scenario. The procedure is that the Russian player sets out his forces first, then the German and then the Russian adds in his anti-tank and artillery units. Both sides have an area assigned to each formation and must cover their front line with units or zones of control. The German player moves first, so the Russian player is under great pressure to get his initial placement right. To be able to stand up to attack by units in Assault mode, Russian stacks must contain at least five steps - the equivalent of a Corps. The Russian player also has to cover his entire front line, with each formation inside its assigned area. This is no easy task. It is probable that there will be weak spots and the German player will attempt to exploit them. The Russian player is best able to defend the shoulders of the salient - where the historical attacks came and where the German armoured spearheads are located - leaving a weaker crust around the rest. The German now gets the chance to set his troops out. He has more leeway than the Russian as he can move his troops before actually attacking.

However, it is well worthwhile deciding where your attacks are going to be and setting up as close as possible. The Russian then adds in his artillery and anti-tank units, reacting to the German threats as much as he can. Both players will have decided the modes of their units when setting up. For the Russian this is relatively simple: Static mode for everybody (with one or two exceptions, if possible, to give a mobile reserve) in order to gain the defensive bonus. The German has to be more careful. The actual attacking units need to be in Assault mode to get both attacks. However, this will halve their movement so they need to be close to what they're going to attack. In addition it is worthwhile keeping some armour in Mobile mode - and possibly in Independent Command - in order to exploit any gaps that open up in the Russian line. The rest of the troops guarding the flanks can be put into Static mode in case of Russian counter attacks, although it may be worthwhile leaving some units in Mobile mode to pursue any precipitate retreat by the Russians. With all this to think about, you will not be surprised that just setting up the game can take some time - I recommend a crossword or a good book for each player while the other guy's doing his stuff.

Game Turn one: the German panzers roll forward; first the defending anti-tank guns take their toll of the advancing tanks - this is generally only a step or two, but every little helps - and get killed in reply; then the full weight of the assault lands on the defending Russians, modified by both sides' artillery (and aircraft). In general, a Russian five step unit (Corps) or stack, attacked by the maximum 72 points of German units, will lose three, possibly four steps. (The Russian should not take retreats if he can avoid it as that allows the German to advance across the entrenchments and annihilates any remaining anti-tank or artillery units). The German lops a step or two off his infantry and smiles. The second combat segment wipes out the defending Russians. Luckily for the Russians the German player cannot make many attacks of this size in a turn, but the result will still be several holes in the Russian line. In the Mechanised movement phase the German player gets the chance to exploit his gaps with any units in Mobile mode. If the Russian has set up his troops well, there will be a second row of defending units to bring this advance up short; if not, he's in trouble. It is now the Russian player's turn. His major decision is how many - and which - reserve formations to activate. This is not an easy question to answer as, even when activated, reserve units can take several turns to get to the scene of the action - there are a few formations in easy reach which are the first to be activated though. My general principle is to activate as many units as possible and move them in towards the hot spots. This has a cost in victory points, but will also slow the German advance, stopping him from getting so many territorial victory points.

Assuming that the German player does not make any spectacular breakthroughs, the game progresses in much the same way - German attacks knocking holes in the Russian lines which the Russian then plugs as best he can, slowly retreating across his entrenchments all the time. The outcome of the game will generally depend on the care with which the Russian player deploys his troops and the astuteness of the German player in choosing where to make his attacks. At the end the Russian is left with a large pile of dead units, hopefully balanced by a large number of towns that the German has not captured. All the above goes by the board if the Germans manage a breakthrough. In this case, it's a mad scramble by the Russians to pull as many units as possible back out of any potential pockets and to activate sufficient reserves to form some sort of line against further incursions. In fact I claim the signal honour of having lost the entire Kursk salient in two game turns following adroit German attacks on some major flaws in my initial deployment. And this in spite of the warning that the defender tends to win when both players are new to the system!

The result of this is that the game plays slowly. The Russian cannot afford many mistakes, and no major ones. The German is always looking for his best advantage, so each turn is full of planning and pondering. This, I'm afraid, rather puts me off the game. I prefer my games fairly fast and furious. The game contains an impressive amount of detail and realism - the comprehensive OB for one thing - and is really excellently done. The system works well, with the odd hiccup, and, I feel, is a very good simulation of the battle. However, I can only say that I find it a bit dull. It somehow lacks that spark that arouses and captures the interest, bringing one back to play a game again and again. This game is certainly one I'm glad to have played both from the point of view of the system, and as a historical simulation of an important battle, but it is not a game that I think will be played very often.

