

A SECOND STALINGRAD

A Soviet Victory in PANZERGRUPPE GUDERIAN

By Mark Green

The title of this article is neither chronologically nor historically accurate. It does, however, capture the flavor of the Soviet strategy outlined below. No longer are the heroic defenders of "Holy Mother Russia" going to be driven across the map, pulverized piecemeal, cut off and annihilated. They are going to dig in and slug it out until enough reinforcements arrive on the flanks for them to envelop the cornered Hun and destroy the cream of Hitler's armies. Stalingrad is going to be fought a little early, and in front of Smolensk!

The game of *PANZERGRUPPE GUDERIAN* has seen a number of Soviet defenses proposed, but all pre-suppose pulling back to Smolensk in the middle game and a fighting withdrawal to a line from Vyazma to Roslavl towards the end of the game. All these strategies have some validity, but all condemn the Soviets to fight a mainly passive game of delay and defense. The Series Replay of Vol. 21, No. 4 of *THE GENERAL* was a representative sample of the "standard" *PGG* game; the Soviet player sacrificed some 20 units in a delaying action north and east of Orsha, fought hard in front of Smolensk during turns five through eight, and defended the Vyazma-Roslavl line desperately at the end. But the panzers still reached the eastern edge of the map-board for a German victory.

The "Quagmire Defense" of Mr. Murrell (Vol. 22, No. 4) is an original strategy to be sure, but I believe that it contains several dangerous flaws. The worst is the difficulty of reinforcing the line south of Orsha, along the 0420-0430 line. Reinforcements railed to Mogilev are going to take three turns from hex X, the source of most new Soviet units. This will place an undue burden on the Russian rail capacity, because you can be sure that from Turn 3 onward there is going to be major enemy pressure in this area. It is comparatively awkward for Soviet infantry to march to this area from the central Vitebsk-Orsha zone because of the Dnepr River and the straight linear defense. This defensive line has no depth or flexibility; if it breaks anywhere, the whole position becomes a deathtrap. Although I believe that the "Quagmire Defense" is too far forward, it does have one redeeming feature—it is a very aggressive defense!

At first glance the German player seems to have all the advantages. His units are stronger, faster and more resilient. Many German units get to move twice per turn, once before combat and once afterwards. Four cities—Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev and Smolensk—lie within one turn's movement of the panzers and add up to 45 out of the fifty Victory Points needed to secure a German "marginal victory". The Russian units are untried before combat, so that the Soviet player is often unsure of the strength of his positions. He seems destined for a desperate game of "make-and-mend" as he attempts to shore up rapidly crumbling defenses. The German player usually makes from 50 to 80 overruns/attacks per game, while the Soviets make less than ten.

Russian advantages are more obscure; but I believe that an aggressive strategy based on some sensible evaluations can often produce a Soviet victory of stunning proportions. Deep inside the Kremlin, STAVKA comes up with a more imaginative plan. It has certain risks, but given the general trend of *PGG* games, these are no worse than those of any other plan. And the reward for success will be a negative German score!

The Soviets must fight on the defensive, and the terrain is their best ally. The Germans will have to

come to you, so the key to overall strategy must be to maneuver combat onto terrain favorable to your units (i.e., defending in woods and behind river lines). Your set-up and dispositions over the first three turns will largely dictate the pattern of play as the German will be reacting to your strategy. Only on Turn 3 do German attack factors catch up with the Russian defense factors in play; thereafter they remain roughly equal unless the Russians start to take some very heavy casualties. A Russian defense line anchored on doubled and tripled terrain, however, starts to look distinctly ominous for the German player unless a breakthrough is quickly obtained.

A second potential Russian advantage is that of time. The Soviet commander has no timetable in which to achieve particular objectives; he would be happy if nothing happened in these three weeks. The German player, on the other hand, has twelve turns to take at least five cities without incurring more than minor damage to his main units. A strong forward defense that denies many Victory Point hexes can make a real mess of the early German timetable and produces a sense of urgency in the German player. Now a German player in a rush is a guy liable to press too hard and start to overrun/attack at 1:2 odds. One "AE" result, and he has more to do in even less time—a recipe for disaster as desperation creeps in. Never forget the psychological element in conflict.

The main advantage the Russian player ought to exploit, however, is a ramification of the game system itself. The key factor is that a reinforceable defending stack of Russian units will steadily improve as the weaker units are weeded out to satisfy combat losses. The "sticky" ZOC rules mean that German units which don't immediately eliminate the defenders in a (usually doubled terrain) hex are likely to be stuck for awhile fighting at worsening odds. For example: three panzer divisions attack a stack of three Russian infantry units across a river. The Russians are revealed as units of 6-6-6, 3-4-6 and 1-1-6, giving odds of 48:22 (or 2:1). Even if two Russian units are eliminated, the panzers still face a 1:2 overrun to make progress. More likely is the elimination of just the 1-1-6 unit, leaving the panzers stuck to an insignificant proportion of the Soviet forces and awaiting a new U-6 Russian unit to replace the lost 1-1-6. A German retreat will split up the divisions; it may well even be feasible for the 3-4-6 unit to advance to pin some of them, secure in the knowledge of a safe line of retreat.

It is important for the Soviet player to keep casualties to a safe level. Losses can average three to five units per turn without too much anxiety, so long as the reinforcements move up to the line at a steady rate. Units on board are not sufficient however; they must reach the right places at the right time as well. It is here that experience really shows, especially during the congested turns at the beginning of the game. Scheduled reinforcements and the SW Front optional reinforcements over the first five turns must dovetail into the unfolding pattern of your strategy.

The German forces are dependent upon the 0120-Smolensk road to supply any advance to Smolensk and beyond. While the Russians hold hex 0518, German units south of the Dnepr will run out of supply at about the 20XX line, which makes Smolensk much more secure. North of the River Kasplya, German supply runs out at about the "21" hexrow line. Consequently any Soviet defense that can hold the line from Vitebsk to 0518 and the river

flanks back for a dozen hexes has a good chance of stalling PG Guderian semi-permanently. This is the first broad half of the Soviet plan. The Germans must either continue to butt against reinforceable doubled positions, or they advance on the flanks out of supply. Either move opens them up for the counter-offensive brewing on the flanks, as Soviet reinforcements march into line. This is the second half of the Soviet plan.

THE SOVIET DEFENSE

The Soviet plan, then, is to occupy strong positions between Vitebsk and Orsha and back along the river flanks of the Dnepr and Kasplya/West Dvina. The success of this is largely dependent on the movement of Lukin and the 16th Army (which occurs in some 50% of *PGG* games). I would not recommend trying this without Lukin. Of course, the availability of the 19th Army would make things even easier, and having both sets of units occurs in 25% of these games.

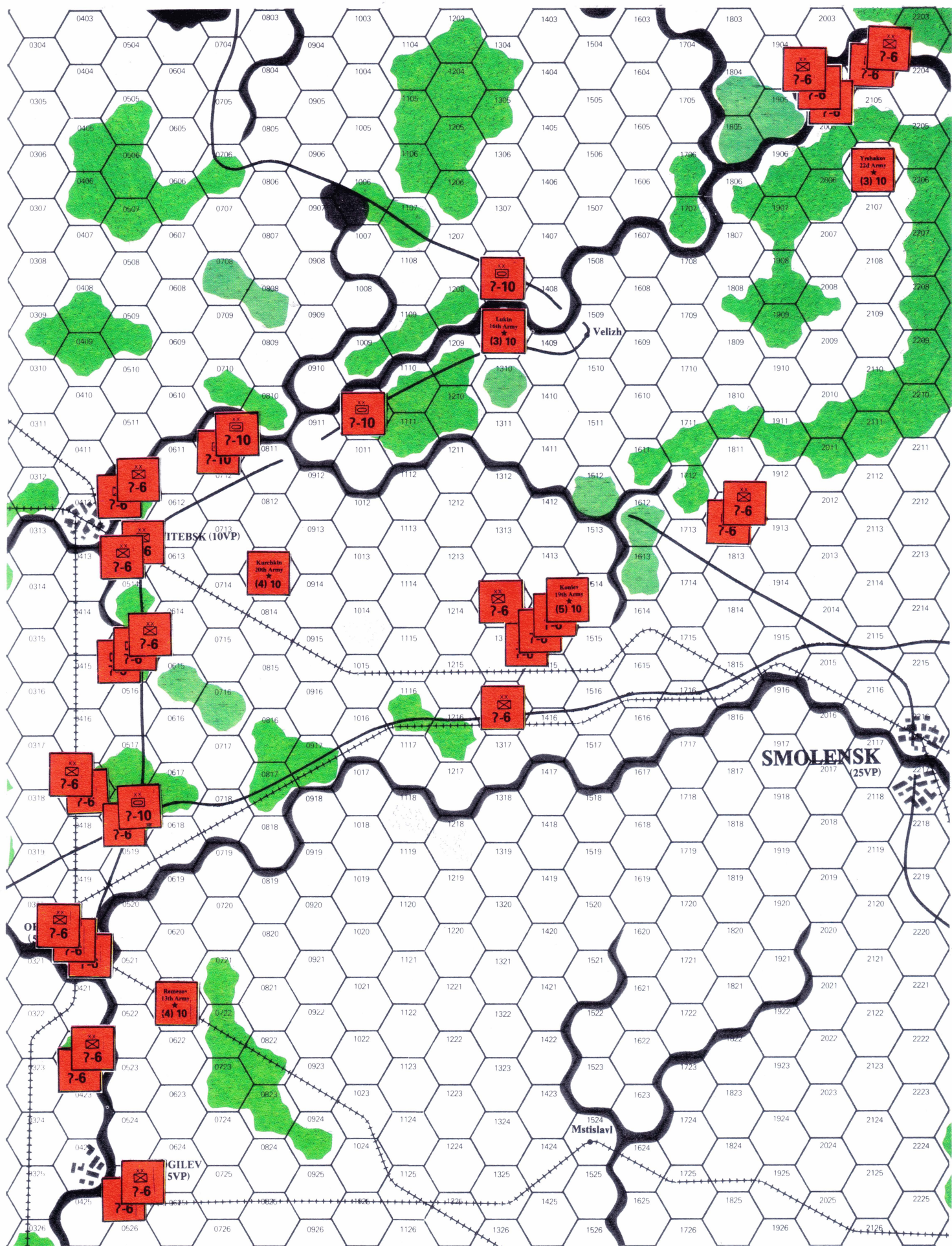
The 13th Army takes charge of the area Orsha-Mogilev while preparing to abandon both cities on Turn 2 if the Germans stay north of Vitebsk. The 20th Army, with four railed units of the 16th, prepares very strong positions from 0518 up through Vitebsk and along the river lines towards Velizh. Lukin and the remainder of the 16th Army, and Yershakov's forces, march towards the Velizh area, where they are likely to be needed on Turn 2. The initial dispositions are shown in Figure 1.

At this point the German player has three basic options: swing north for the relatively undefended area around Velizh; batter the strong central defenses of Vitebsk-Orsha; move south of the Dnepr. The southern strategy looks to be the worst option, as it will make little progress across awkward terrain and takes troops away from the Turn 2 reinforcements. The Germans are not yet strong enough to be able to divide their forces. The central advance looks to make slow progress against stacks two or three units high in doubled or tripled positions. Swinging to the north will produce few first turn attacks (if any) but gives access to weakly defended areas and a link with the second turn reinforcements.

On the 2nd turn, much Soviet attention will be focused on stifling German progress in the north. Koniev, Yershakov and the rest of the 16th Army should form strong defenses along the Kasplya and/or West Dvina, or in the forests east and southeast of Velizh. Meanwhile, the rest of the frontline units move into positions the Soviet commander aims to hold: 0512 to 0517 to 0818 to 1118 and back along the Dnepr to Smolensk. Every frontline hex should be doubled terrain or better, and can be reinforced from reserves strung out along the Smolensk-Vitebsk railroad. Infantry in reserve in 1115 can reach any of fourteen key defensive hexes (1412, 1211, 0912, 0711, 0512, 0513, 0515, 0517, 0617, 0818, 1217, 1517 and 1716). These fourteen hexes, plus reserves, will tie up some 40-45 units, about half of onboard Soviet strength by Turn 3 or 4.

What are the rest of the Russian units doing meanwhile? The forces in the north, along with reinforcements from the Smolensk area, will be acting as a punch bag for the opening German drives. The only danger in the first three or four turns will come with a breakthrough in the north, as Turn 3 German rein-

Figure 1: Initial Soviet Dispositions



forcements cannot reach farther than 16XX on a southern sweep and still attempt to run back north across the Dnepr. On Turn 2 the Soviets take five SW Front reinforcements in entrance hex Z. These link with 21st Army units and a further five SW Front reinforcements brought on in Turn 3 to start forming the line from Smolensk to Roslavl. Ratutin's 24th Army will be marching to Smolensk, arriving south of that city on Turn 3. All movement by rail concentrates on shifting troops from entrance hex X forward to provide replacements for front-line casualties. The 30th Army sets out on a long march to join the northern flank, arriving in the combat zone about Turn 5.

Turns 3-5 should see the German battering at a line of doubled positions while strong Soviet forces build up in the Smolensk-Roslavl area, just beyond the range of supplied German attack. The fourth and fifth turns are the crucial ones as German pressure will be at its strongest south of the Dnepr. If the Russians hold they are almost assured a significant victory as reinforcements reach the area west of Smolensk. German attacks will rarely be at better odds than 2:1 (very often, at 1:1). This is due to the fact that the average strength of three Soviet infantry units is 12; doubled for terrain makes it 24. The strongest German attack from three hexes before Turn 5 has a strength of 77, but most attacks will be in the range of 24-48 attack factors. As combat culls out the weaker Soviet units, the average defense strength of Russian positions will steadily improve. Unless a Russian stack turns out to be appallingly weak, German overruns should be rare and Russian casualties should be limited to the results of half-a-dozen low-odds attacks.

As the German advance begins to stall, the Soviet player should begin to edge forward with his flanking units. This will have three effects. First, it will shorten the defensive line to produce a higher force-space ration. Second, it will force German units to deploy on the flanks to guard against being surrounded. Third, it will pass most of the initiative over to the Soviet player, with opportunities to select points of attack and isolate German units. This move really puts the German player on the horns of a dilemma; he must concentrate his forces to break through the tough Soviet defenses, but he must also spread his units to protect himself from being outflanked! It is not possible to do both, and many German units will be stuck by ZOCs to the main Russian positions and so unable to move anyway.

Now is the time for the Soviet player to counter-attack. The northern and southern units will move around the enemy flanks to engulf the panzers. Other units will advance through the inevitable gaps in the German "line", exploiting the misfortunes of German divisions stuck close together by ZOCs. It is not important that the Russian infantry is a bit slow; the Soviet advance is more like a flood of treacle rather than the surgical instrument of the German player. The German units will be pinned in front by strong stacks, and any retreat after combat will be countered by a Russian advance to maintain the pin. Desperation may soon creep into the German play, with reckless attacks and overruns mounted in the vain hope of wrestling free from the cloying Russian masses. Soon the battle will break up into individual pockets of combat, with German divisions being whittled down as they struggle to restore supply and a coherent front. All attempts to reach Smolensk are abandoned, and the only question is how many German divisions will be destroyed before Turn 12. A moderately successful execution of this strategy will surrender 10 Victory Points for Orsha and Mogilev to the German player, but cost 30 points for a half-dozen eliminated German divisions. Soviet *decisive* victory is even a real possibility.



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