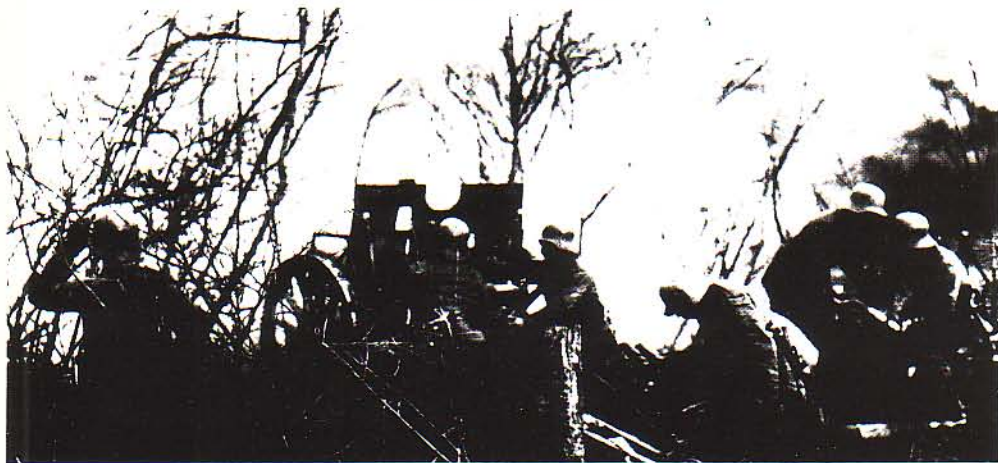


GREAT WAR IN THE EAST

ANDREW McGEE



SPI seem suddenly to have discovered the First World War; in the last two plus years they have given us "Green Fields Beyond", "Tannenberg" and now **Great War in the East Quad**. The physical components may be dealt with briefly; 4 standard SPI folio maps, 200 counters per game, standard and exclusive rules and a 16-page historical article. All of these are of the usual SPI standard without being especially memorable.

The four games in the set are: **Serbia/Galicia**, **The Brusilov Offensive**, **Von Hindenburg in Poland** and **Caporetto**. The first deals with the two-front campaign of the Austrian Army in the first months of the war, the second with what might be regarded as Russia's last fling, the offensive against the Central Powers on the borders of Austro-Hungary in the summer of 1916. **Von Hindenburg in Poland** covers the Russian counter-offensive in front of Warsaw in October-November 1914, whilst **Caporetto** simulates the Central Powers' incursion into Italian territory in October-November 1917.

Game-System.

Readers who have played **Tannenberg** can safely skip this part, as the same game-system is used.

The system is simple Movement before Combat with just three added extras — Supply, Command Control and Cavalry Withdrawal Before Combat. As will become apparent, Command Control is easily the most important of these.

Movement.

This is very standard, and it is necessary only to comment on the influence of Supply and Command Control. Supply for movement purposes is traced at the beginning of the Movement Phase. There are three types of supply source; friendly map edges, friendly railroads and Supply Depots, although the second and third must trace ultimately to a friendly map edge. In order to be in supply, units must be within Supply Range of a Supply Source (Supply Range varies from game to game and nationality to nationality). Units out of supply at this stage have their Movement Allowances halved. Command Control is based on Headquarters. Every HQ has a Command Radius and a Command Capacity. The former is the radius within which it may give Command, and the latter is the number of stacking points within that radius which may benefit from the Command. Thus an area of the front in which the player wants to move many units may need more than one HQ, although it should be noted that this control applies only for the Movement Phase. Not all is lost for a unit which is not Commanded by an HQ; the general level of efficiency of each army is assessed by a Tactical Competence Rating from 1 (best) to 4, and units outside Command range may move on the throw of a number greater than the TCR. Units out of supply at the end of the Movement Phase face a 50% risk of 50% attrition.

Cavalry Withdrawal before Combat.

Immediately before the Combat Phase the non-phasing Player may attempt the withdrawal of any of his cavalry units which are adjacent to enemy units. The withdrawal, if effected, is exactly two hexes; each unit attempting the manoeuvre must throw a number higher than its Tactical Competence Rating. The reason for allowing this tactic is of course to simulate the use of cavalry as a screen; withdrawal allows enemy units to advance into the vacated hex, but no further. Thus cavalry may delay enemy units at little risk to themselves. Only units with TCR of 1 may withdraw into or through an enemy-controlled/occupied hex.

Combat.

Combat between adjacent opposing units is voluntary. Most of the Combat system is familiar: odds ratios with adjustments for terrain. But Combat Resolution is preceded by a Command Control Segment. The principle is similar to that used in the Movement Command Control Segment, except that there is no saving die-roll for units not commanded from HQ's; units out of Combat Command Control may not attack. It is important to realise that the same HQ unit may give command to one set of units for movement purposes and to quite another set for combat purposes.

The Combat Results Table is original only in the options provided by its various results. The most important point about the Option Table is that the attacker can never take his losses as retreats; thus attacking is always likely to be an expensive business. Further, since defending units can usually take at least some of their losses as retreats, the attacker is likely to find that the only product of his heavy losses is a few hexes of ground which do him little good and which he will find difficult to hold. There is but one exception to this. Units with TCR 2, 3 or 4 may not retreat into unoccupied enemy-controlled hexes. If forced to do so, they are eliminated. This produces the situation well-known to players of games from **Napoleon at War** to **Cobra** where the only sure way of destroying an enemy unit is to surround it. Of course in WW1 battles with solid lines of units this is by no means easy to achieve, and the Combat Results system does tend to produce the same kind of bloody combat over the same few acres of ground as happened historically. Indeed this is perhaps the strongest point of the system — players really do learn very rapidly that frontal assault comes extremely expensive; the second thing they learn is that there is really no other way to win most of the battles!

The relative brevity of this account of the game-system may rightly be taken to indicate that **GWIE** is a reasonably simple set of games. There are nevertheless a number of gaps and ambiguities in the rules — when it was SPUKTESTED by the

Oxford University Wargames Club a total of 37 points were raised; at time of writing the errata which is supposed to result has not appeared. Some of these points can be papered over with a little common sense, but others, such as the total failure to supply set-up hexes for certain supply units in **Von Hindenburg** cannot be resolved without second sight.

It remains only to look at each of the four games in turn.

The Brusilov Offensive.

"This last vital effort of the Russian army in the war had important consequences. It stopped the Austrian attack on Italy, already impaired by an Italian riposte. It compelled Falkenhayn to withdraw troops from the Western Front, and so abandon his plan for a counter stroke against the British offensive preparing on the Somme, as well as the hope of nourishing his Verdun attrition process. It led Rumania to take her fateful decision to enter the war on the Entente side, and caused the supersession of Falkenhayn in the Supreme Command, and his replacement by Hindenburg." (Liddell Hart's *History of the First World War*. Chapter 6.)

It can be seen from the above that strategically at least this offensive was not wholly unsuccessful. But we encounter here one of the major criticisms which I would direct at this set of games; the Victory Conditions are purely tactical; the game is about destroying enemy units and taking terrain, but this goes on, if at all, in a complete vacuum. Doubtless the average Russian soldier did not give a damn about Verdun, but for the player the problem is that there is no apparent reason to conduct this offensive — except of course that it gives Victory Points; in **Tannenberg** the problem was neatly handled by forcing the Russian Player to concentrate on triggering the West Front Reinforcements.

However, if you can accept the constraints of the limited purpose of the offensive, the game plays well. To people accustomed to think of the Russian army here as woefully incompetent, it is a pleasure to watch them throwing the sales Boches out of the trenches; trying to maintain the force of the offensive, which is prone to bog down once the benefit of first turn surprise has evaporated is less of a pleasure. The Russian armoured car unit is an appealing touch (though rather prone to breaking down!) This is an enjoyable game if you like killing units.

Caporetto.

The Italian counters are an unprepossessing shade of yellow, a fact which inevitably reinforces players' prejudices and affects their view of the game. In fact the Italians do rather well, if properly handled, though it is true that their enemies (the Austro-Hungarians, mainly) were by this stage nearly as exhausted and fed up with the war as were the Italians. Historically, however, this game appears not to work. The history of the Caporetto offensive seems to typify military thinking in the First World War. The only reason for involving Austro-Hungary in an offensive in the first place was to raise her morale; Caporetto was chosen as a soft touch, and the original plan for a limited morale-boosting exercise was expanded into something much grander without any increase in forces available. The attackers in the game have ambitious objectives, in fact they achieved them because of Italian inefficiency, but a competent Italian player (competent in game terms, that is) will not hesitate to trade ground for time, keeping his force intact whilst inflicting losses on German Stosstruppen, thereby scoring many Victory Points. Of course if the Italian follows historical strategy, he will be massacred, but he has no incentive to do so. This is the cleanest of the four games from the rules point of view, but does little to explain why Caporetto happened as it did.

Serbia/Galicia.

Back now to the heady "Home before the leaves fall" days. This game is billed as Austria's two front war, but only in the most nominal sense was it so; facing the Russians and the Serbs at the same time can perhaps best be compared with the plight of a boxer taking on Muhammed Ali and two geriatric mice. The Serbs, though weak, did not

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GREAT WAR CONTINUED

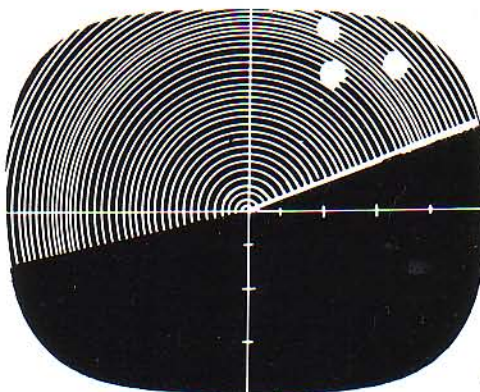
lack courage; one lesson rapidly learned from the game is that the worst thing the Serbs can do is attack. Their army is efficient, but not sufficient, and they can ill afford the losses inevitable in an attack. At the same time, the last thing the Austrians want is to be facing both opponents at once; consequently the Serbian front tends to be rather quiet. On the other front the Austrians and the Russians slug it out like two out-of-condition prize fighters warming up for a long bout. The early months of the war must have had an air of unreality even for the generals participating in them; certainly this game seems to reflect that no one had really sorted out what was going on; the objectives are limited, as are the capabilities of the armies. This is a very frustrating game, for players will naturally want to be more ambitious — a futile wish as they will discover.

Von Hindenburg in Poland.

Another game from the early days; after the early exchanges on the East Front the fighting fizzled out, but the Russians sought to launch another offensive in front of Warsaw. The Germans were beginning to feel the strain of their two-front war and the Grand Duke Nicholas was able to make a certain amount of progress before the Germans brought up reinforcements and counter-attacked, retaking much of the lost ground. Fortunately the official errata does provide the answer to the supply units conundrum, and this game is the most mobile of the four in the quad and thus perhaps the least typical of First World War warfare. The Russians do appear surprisingly efficient, but the game is strong on history, as well as maintaining interest right up to the end.

Evaluation.

There is no doubt that this set of games fills a gap in the coverage of the 20th Century. Further, the game system is, by contemporary standards at least, fairly simple; the time scale of three days per turn allows the coverage of extended campaigns without an excessive sacrifice of playability. For the pure games player this game is likely to be a winner, but from the simulation point of view there is something missing. Firstly, it is possible, on occasion, to indulge in non-historical strategies which satisfy the game Victory Conditions. Second, and more important, is the criticism voiced earlier that the games give no understanding of why things happened as they did. The system is a sound vessel, but the designers seem to have forgotten to fill it.



Contact!

Contact entries will appear twice and will then automatically lapse. Please ensure that you contact me in good time if you want to continue or change your entry. An * before an insert signifies the first appearance and as such will automatically appear in issue 25; all others will lapse after this issue.

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* **BRENTWOOD WARGAMES CLUB**. New members needed to establish and extend newly formed club. Contact Mike Oliver, Tel **BRENTWOOD** 810169 or Murray Cowles, Tel Brentwood 811540.

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