

Fighting on the Eastern Front (without tears): Tactics in Panzergruppe Guderian

PAUL KING

SPI's Panzergruppe Guderian (PGG) game system has stood the test of time now, producing many offspring: *Cobra*, *Kharkov*, *Drive on Stalingrad* and the *Army Group South Quad* — *Kiev*, *Rostov*, *Operation Star* and *Korsun*. So why the attraction for this system? The game turn sequence is very smooth, based on a theme of move, combat and a second move phase for mechanised units. Added to this are some useful features; overruns; uncomplicated supply rules which are related to command control; simple air rules which have an immediate effect on the game; many untried units, generally the Russians, so neither player knows exactly what is going to happen in combat, which itself is not compulsory. All in all a pleasing divisional level game in which what happens in detail is more important than taking entire theatres into consideration.

As the title states, we are concerned with the Eastern Front, so must omit *Cobra*. Dealing with Patton's drive into France and the formation of the Falaise pocket, the game can be removed on two grounds. First of all it is highly terrain intensive, and secondly is concerned with the superiority of Allied material over an extended German foe. The Eastern front games give us greater scope and are less concerned with terrain effects, therefore giving a larger range of tactical options.

So let us take two typical opponents, the German forces are led by Panzer leader Geyer von Cluck, the Soviet colossus by General Sookof. Climbing into his Panzer IV, von Cluck grins and commands "Panzers March!" Four turns later he has ruined five Panzer Divisions, most of his armour is fighting out of supply and he is desperate for reinforcements. Sookof does not seem to be doing well either — a third of his forces have been lost in trade-offs, his grandiose plan of a two pronged attack is weak and getting nowhere. Actually he is wishing he had those wonderful Panzer forces instead of all those untried units; von Cluck is panic struck and is cursing the same units. Every time he tries an overrun they are too strong for him, and he has had lousy die rolls all the time. Where have our intrepid heroes gone wrong? What can we do to help them?

German Tactics.

To begin with let us take a look at those marvelous mechanised units von Cluck put his faith in. Panzers, Motorised Infantry and Panzergrenadier divisions take their true strength by stacking for an integrity bonus. This, I am sure, we can take for granted, even von Cluck has the good sense to keep all the regiments of a particular mechanised division in one hex, and nothing else interfered

with stacking in that hex. Normally a panzer division will double its strength to a total of 16, but so what! Stack three full strength infantry divisions and this gives a strength of (3 x 9) which is 27, almost double that of our glorious Panzers; so what does make them important? Mobility is the answer. Mechanised units can move their full range in both of the movement phases, before and after combat, whereas the poor infantry only move before combat. Mechanised units can launch an attack and concentrate at one point of the enemy line, afterwards they can move on to exploit a gap in the line or fall back to produce a diffuse line themselves, but within each other's range for the next concentration. The Soviet can only reinforce one area, so wherever he goes, the mechanised units go elsewhere.

So can we dispose of the infantry? After all they are slow in comparison to mechanised units. Of course we cannot since they are a vital arm of the force. Combat results are taken in hex retreats or step losses in strength. An infantry division usually has four step losses before being eliminated, thus a stack of three such divisions has twelve steps. Each regiment of a mechanised division only has two steps. Therefore it will have six steps available before elimination, half that available to the infantry. However, to this must be added the fact that the loss of one regiment from the division means no integrity bonus, as part of the force is missing. Mechanised units are really very fragile flowers in comparison to infantry. Infantry cannot hope to keep up with armour on the move, so they should be used to pin down enemy formations and thus leave the mechanised units free to use their movement properly. Since combat is not mandatory they can hold down many units without attacking, and with a strength of 9 they are fairly free from heavy losses and can take step reduction initially with little loss to the defense.

How then should armour and infantry work together? The best mode of attack is to isolate an area and reduce the enemy units within it. Whenever possible, armour should not attack a city directly, infantry must be in support or do the job entirely on their own. When units are out of supply i.e. unable to trace a line, uncontrolled by enemy units or zones of control, to a supply source, their attack and defense factors are halved. So for units to attack out of a pocket in such a condition is very dangerous unless outside help can be found. To stop such a situation arising, the surrounding German units must be set up in such a way that outside units cannot reach the pocket and even surround German units in turn. If this possibility looks likely, then the endangered area must have adjacent units in a line, thus allowing supply to be traced through them from the endangered unit.

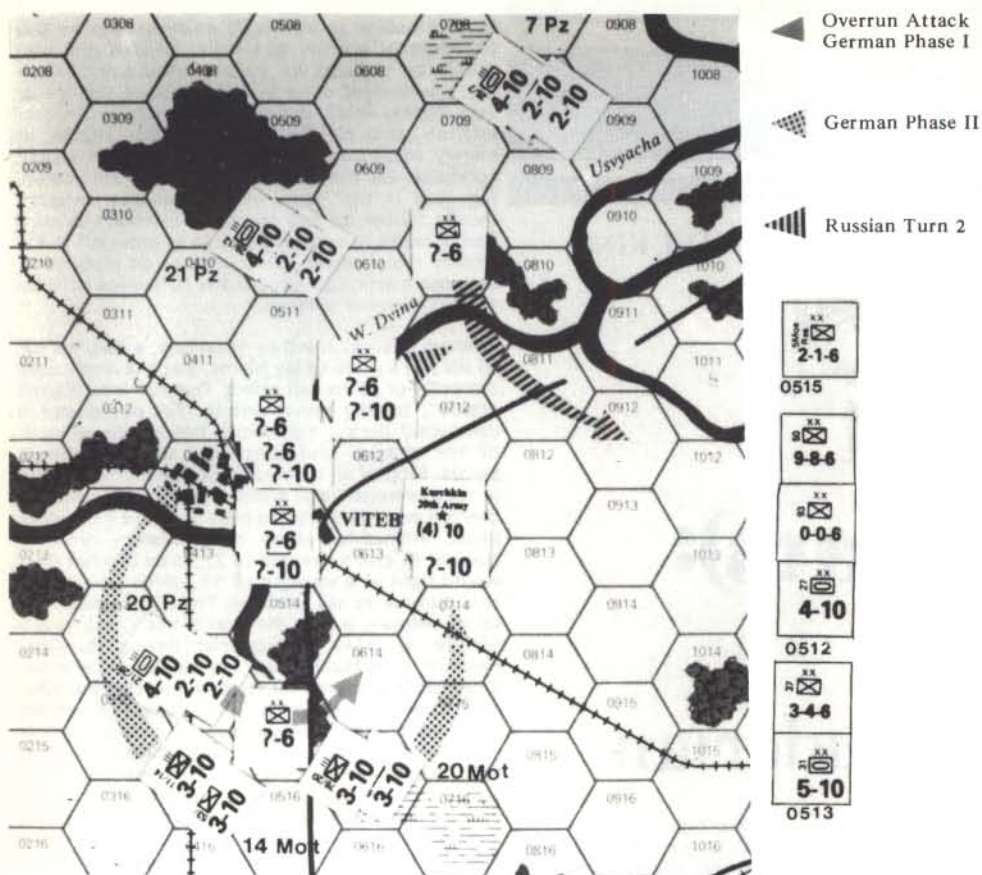
Once a pocket is formed it must be reduced and collapsed as quickly as possible, within one turn should be the aim, so pockets should not be too big. Mechanised units must be massed for one or two attacks plus some infantry support. Other infantry units can be used for holding attacks, or merely to pin units and ensure an out of supply condition on them. As the enemy is eliminated, for that is the point of the exercise, infantry should follow up and leave the mechanised units free of zones of control and able to move off in the second move phase. Of course, as an alternative, they can attempt to remove any remaining units by the technique of overrun.

Overrun is surrounded by mystique, a panacea for all ills and a place to lay blame. Yet it is rarely used correctly or to its full effect. Overrun is a "mobile attack", trading movement for fire power and is conducted during movement, halving the strength of the attacker and consuming three movement points. First of all let us destroy one myth, overrun is not a prerogative of armoured units, any unit can overrun providing it takes place during a movement phase. Remember those three infantry divisions stacked to give a strength of 27, in an overrun they would fight at a strength of 13, which is a respectable number to say the least. The biggest danger of using overruns is that the likes of von Cluck have a picture of tanks driving over fleeing Russians, machine guns blazing and the air full of screams. The visions conjured up lead to mad dashing overruns in an unco-ordinated manner against untried units which are stacked and in supply. Unfortunately the result is almost always disappointing, with more damage done to the attacker than ground gained from the defender. History is thick with examples so let's try and learn from them. Overruns are a special form of attack and so should only be used in special conditions. The technique is best applied against out of supply units — remember your attack strength is halved, so let's halve the defender's strength if we can as well — who have no terrain advantages, and, if possible, are of known strength. Under such conditions an overrun is bound to work and will probably lead to the defenders elimination as well as disruption, as he may not be able to cross surrounding zones of control in his retreat.

Taking this to its logical conclusion, overruns are of great value in reducing a pocket; they can also be used for which I call the "nudge-shove system". Perhaps the hammer and the anvil would be a better phrase, but does not suggest the delicacy of the operation. This is best used during the second move phase with only mechanised units attacking and needs a small gap in the Russian line. One unit passes through the line and lies to the rear of a unit, it does not attack. Next a second division moves up on the opposite side to its friend. Now the poor Russian is out of supply and ripe for a killing overrun. If step losses can be taken, then a second overrun should be attempted until the opposition is gone. The overrunning unit now moves off to place itself behind the next Soviet unit in the line. Another division now moves up to repeat the tactic, and so on. Since most divisions have a big enough movement allowance to give at least two overruns and still move off to continue the chain, the overall effect can be devastating. By the end of the move the German has built a solid defensive line and created such a gap in the Soviet defenses that he will be hard pressed to do anything about it, especially if more German units are waiting in reserve to exploit the gap next turn.

During his move the German player should always be thinking about what his position will be at the end of that turn. Generally, as many infantry units as possible should be in the front line, pinning down large numbers of Soviet units if possible. Other units in the front should include motorised infantry, but not in contact with any Russians if possible as they will want to move off rapidly in their own turn. Behind this line Panzer and other mechanised units should be spread so that the Russian player is undecided as to where the next attack will come from, and put his reinforcements in the wrong place.

As the game progresses, some step losses are bound to be taken, and with mechanised units being so fragile the question must be asked what do we do with them? To leave them in front line action is very risky, for their elimination will probably give



FIGURES 1 TO 3. Formation of a pocket in 'Panzergruppe Guderian' after a typical game. German units set on the slant; Russian units declared on the right as necessary.

FIGURE 1: German movement phase I: 3 divisions are used on 0515 as it doubles Russian units back to full strength due to terrain. 20Pz moves to 0614 after 'De' result.

Phase II: 14th Motorised pins main Soviet strength in Vitebsk. Placing of 20Pz and 20th Motorised ensure supply in Soviet Turn.

Russian turn 2: northern units move behind the river line as a defence. Vitebsk units attack 14th Mot. in despair - attack odds 1-2 giving A1 - Infantry lost from 0513.

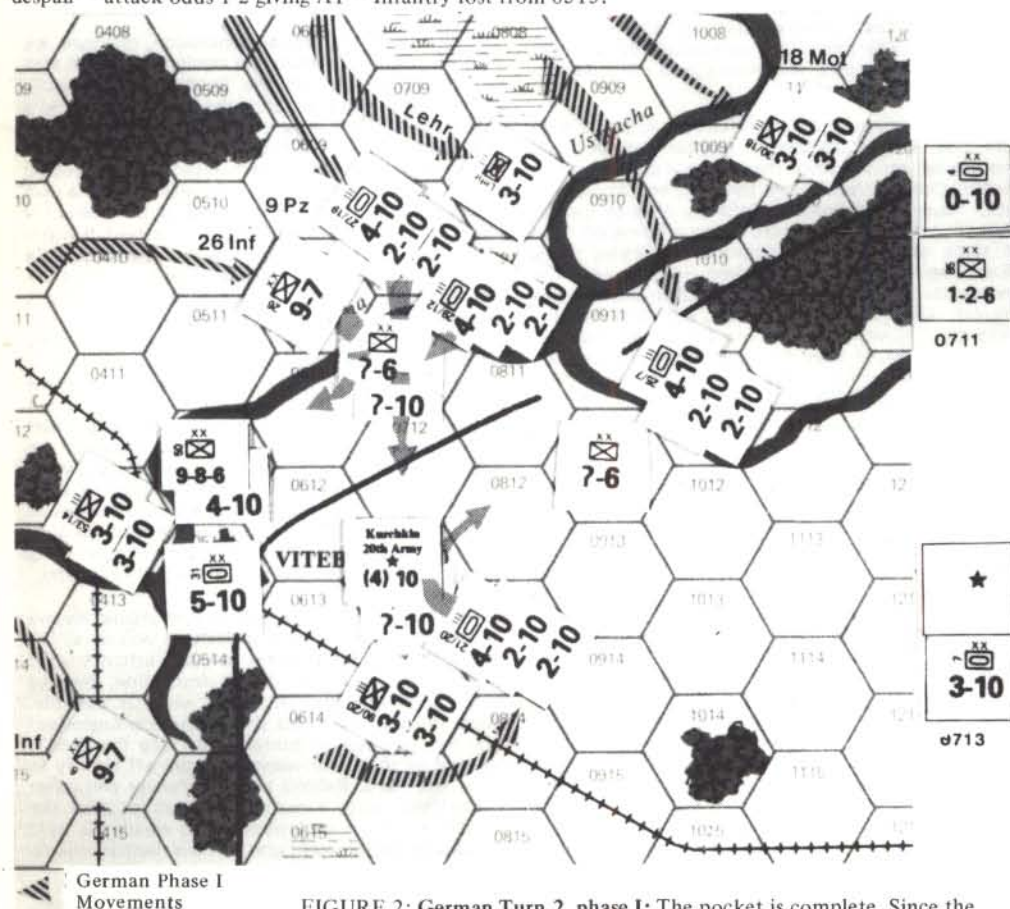


FIGURE 2: German Turn 2, phase I: The pocket is complete. Since the Russian HQ adds nothing to defence 20Pz/Mot. attack the tank unit only. Advance after this combat seals the pocket prior to the attack in the north. This second attack allows all involved units to move after combat, especially 26th Infantry.

valuable victory points to the Soviet player. Such units should then be pulled out of the attack but still used to advantage. They can help out in reducing the odd small pocket which has been left behind in the flow and thus release other, stronger, units for the main attack. One job they can do to good effect is to cover road links and, perhaps most importantly, railroads. In the PGG series the rail network is most commonly controlled by the Russian player. It is upsetting, to say the least, to watch an entire army plus headquarters travel by rail through an exposed flank and reoccupy cities worth vital victory points to you. Fortunately a unit and its zone of control blocks rail movement. So those weakened units should be placed in areas to cut rail links, just a few will do, and they can quickly mass to strike at the entrained intruders. Once the Soviets are out of supply even weak units can slowly wear them down.

Of course, not all the games of the series are based on German advances. Kharkov, Operation Star, Korsun and Drive on Stalingrad have defensive periods in them. Various tactics are possible in these games. Hedgehogs - defensive emplacements - might be allowed. Although these have no zones of control only elimination results have any effect on them, and can form a tripwire line for large concentrations of strength are needed to wipe them out. Some games also give defensive integrity for mechanised units if within two hexes of one another. This gives its best in a triangular formation with two units facing the enemy and one behind to give depth to the defense. If a force attacks this arrangement and gets stuck against it, a counterattack should be mounted if possible, but a lower strength is involved since all the units of a division may not be able to stack for integrity, also the defensive bonus must be kept up at all times. Withdrawal is another useful tactic in the face of strong attacks, but the defensive bonus must be used as a shield. Kharkov and Korsun are good examples of the defensive style of play.

The air combat side of the game tends to be very simple. Air units can be used in combat for an odds shift in attack or defense. Normally I would tend to use German air units to ensure the success of important attacks, especially if the Russian player has a lot of air units. Throwing them into weaker subsidiary attacks can be a waste as the Russian lowers your combat odds on the important attacks with his air units and generally dilutes the overall attack. Supplying units by air is a fairly specific task and is restricted to Korsun and Drive on Stalingrad, so this is one aspect we can omit. The other, and perhaps the most important, use of air units is the interdiction of ground movement. Positioning units on rail lines and the approaches to the important attack areas slows down Soviet movement dramatically, cutting rail movement by almost half in some cases. Slowing down the reinforcement rate is a positive advantage to the German player as this can mean less units to fight at any one particular time.

Taking note of the above tactics is all very well, but one vital ingredient is missing - a coherent strategic plan. This is where a careful scrutiny of the victory point schedule comes in. After studying this and the map, a list of objectives can be made which is related to game turns, thus giving definite objectives by such and such game turn. Drive on Stalingrad, the two map monster of the series, actually provides this as a built in feature of the Hitler Directives rules. These should not be looked upon as a nuisance, but as a useful guide for your plan of action. The schedule you arrive at, with some leeway, should be as realistic as possible and strictly adhered to. Naturally opportunities may arise which may give greater rewards, but be careful and make sure you do not become side-tracked. Happily chewing away at a juicy Russian formation, gleefully cutting it up in the hope of eventually getting somewhere is a huge waste of time. Few victory points, if any, are given for destroying Soviet divisions in most games. The real targets are the cities and road/rail links they protect, for they become important in determining supply as the game progresses. Wiping out as many Soviet units as possible is not the real objective simply because there are too many of them, and a glance at the victory point schedule should always remind you of that fact.

Soviet Tactics

The gallant von Cluck is now deep in thought after reading those German tactics, General Sookof is even more convinced he is commanding the wrong side. So what can be said to calm his fevered brow and still his wild rolling eyes?

One of the most striking features of the Soviet forces is that they are mostly untried, one step strength units. Until they are tried out in combat there is no knowing what is going to turn up. Could that unit be a laughable 0-0-6 or a nasty 8-9-8 Guards Rifle Division. The point is that while the Russian player cannot plan a precise attack, the German player is unable to know where the weak areas may lie. This situation can be even more compounded by stacking untried units to the limit. Normally this will give stacks of three divisions, or a two high stack consisting of a corps plus a brigade or headquarters in Operation Star and Korsun. In a stack a fair attack and defense strength will usually appear, so the Russian player can rest peacefully, knowing he is reasonably secure. Perhaps the best feature of such an arrangement is that the strength should only be revealed in German attacks. You can become quite philosophical about this. It's rather like my saying "All men are equal", it's up to you to prove they are not, not me. The same applies here, for all Soviet forces are the same, the onus is on the German to find out how good the Soviet forces are, and the procedure may well cost him dearly in step losses. Alternatively, the Russian units in a stack may be weak, so take a few step losses and reinforce with fresh untried units. Once again the German has to go through the attack sequence again, and will be forced to do it if one of his precious mechanised units is stuck against you.

The idea of step loss and reinforcement is of great value, especially in the early stages of a game. All units lost are generally returned to the available unit pool and can be returned to play eventually. Also, losses can be accepted as few victory points are likely to be lost, but this is one point where it is worth reading the victory point schedule for the game, you could be throwing points away needlessly.

Still on the point of units, it is well worth examining exactly what you have available. Infantry, Cavalry and mechanised units are the usual mix. The cavalry however have lower strengths than other units on average, so are good for rearguard actions and plugging the occasional gap at short notice. Amongst the infantry divisions the odd Guards Rifle Division will pop up. These are, without a doubt, the Russians best units and owe their strength to better equipment and supply over less favoured formations. Guards units are best used to form the nucleus of an attack. If a few are available for use, as in Kharkov, they should not under any circumstances be stacked. Rather they should be kept separate and make co-ordinated attacks together along with other, weaker, units. Then if step losses are required the weak units take them, allowing the stronger units to press on with the attack. Along the same lines of value are tank brigades, which in concert with infantry give a combined arms approach. Operation Star has strong corps units, but because of their size they cannot stack with anything other than a tank brigade. In this situation the brigades are useful for the step losses and in no way damage the corps unit, thus a strong attack will continue. The combined arms approach is shown to full effect in Kharkov, yet the reason behind it has to be dug out of the rules. A combat odds shift is given in attacks or defense if armoured units are present but your opponent only has infantry. Here was a game which I found well nigh impossible for the Russian to win, yet I was puzzled by the high number of tank brigades available. A third of all available units were weak tank brigades — why? The solution was clear, stack units three high, but make sure the top unit was a tank brigade. Now Kharkov is a stimulating game, for the German player must pile on the strength factors to combat this latent advantage in all Russian stacks as he has little armour to play with, it is an entirely different game to that which it was before.

The other unit type available is the Headquarters. Of little combat value, the headquarters are vital for co-ordinating supply, without them the Soviet forces are just so much cannon fodder. Each has a

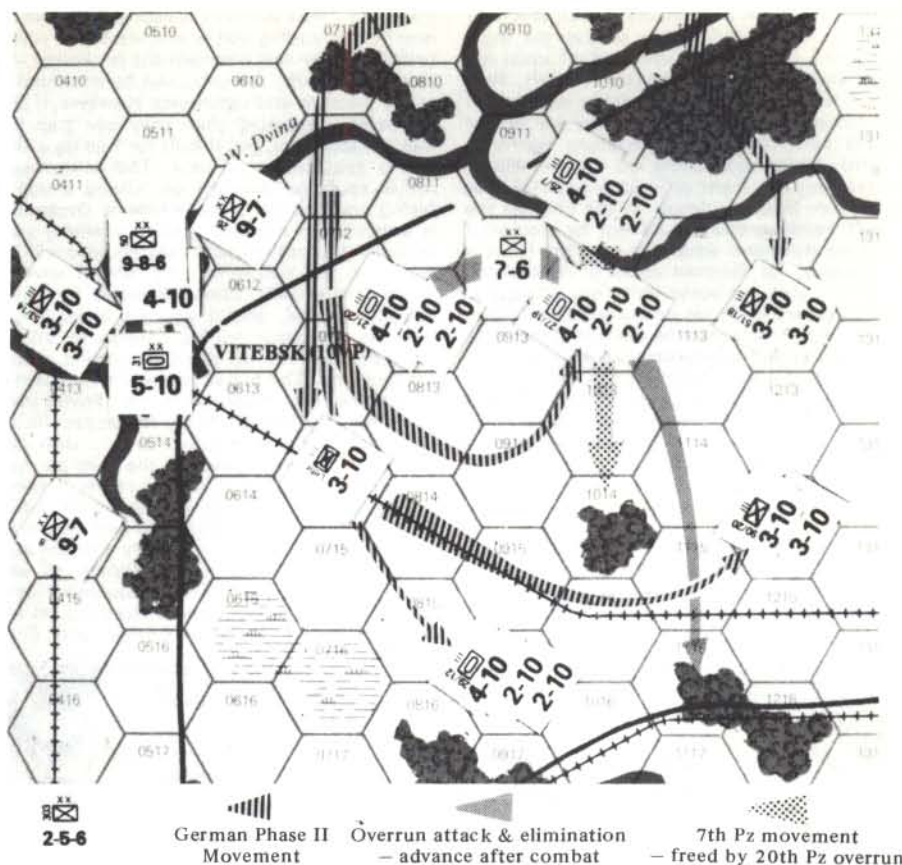


FIGURE 3: German Turn 2, Phase 2: 20th Pz overruns 0912 as the Russian unit is out of supply, gets a successful elimination so moves to 1116. 7th Pz is then free to move to 1014. Lehr ensures encirclement of Vitebsk. Motorised units provide a screen for the panzers by the end of the move.

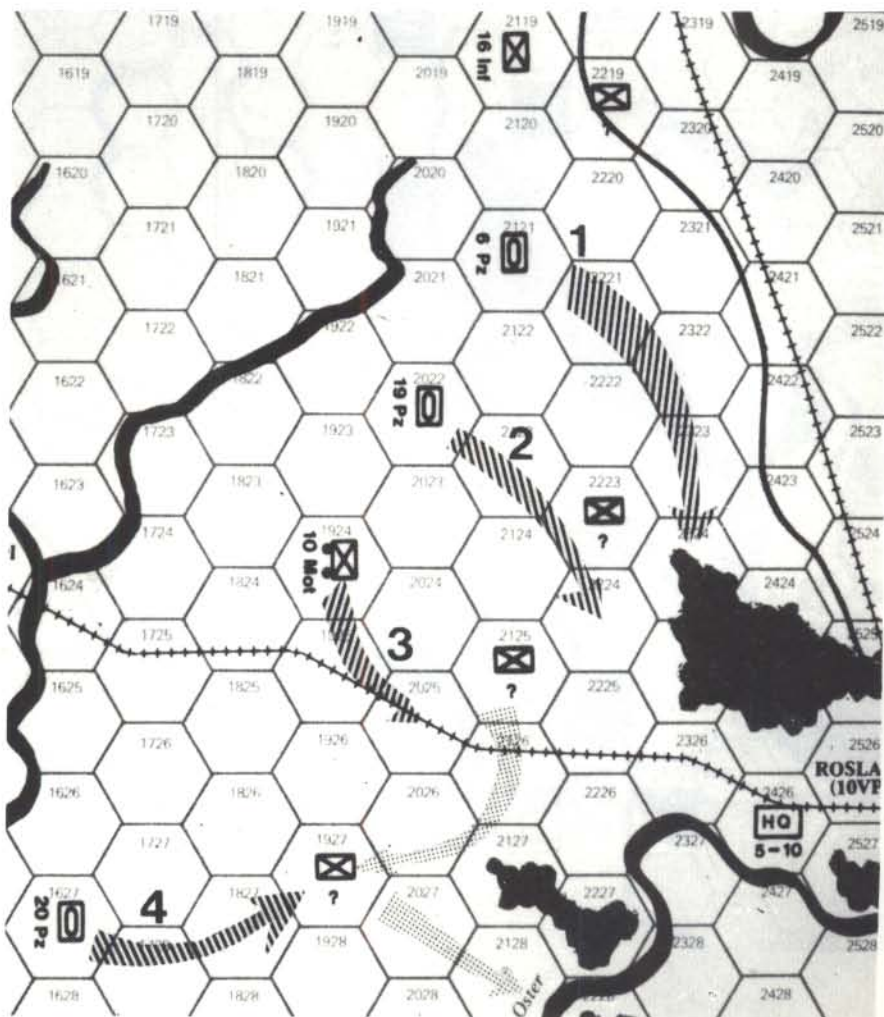


FIGURE 4: Nudge Push System: attack in the sequence labelled leads to crumbling of the Soviet defence line. (German units face right, Soviet face north).

command value which is its supply radius, and they should be arranged, judiciously to give the maximum support to the most units. If all units are in supply and a few headquarters are left, then place them where they can be quickly called up if disaster strikes. Very weak headquarters are of great value when laid in a chain along reinforcement paths. Units then come on and remain in supply, reaching the front as quickly as possible as they pass from leader to leader in the line. At the front itself headquarters should not be stacked if they give no defensive advantage and the front is not continuous, for German zones of control can then interfere and put some units out of supply. Also headquarters must be conserved carefully in attacks. Here the rules must be consulted and facts dug out, such as will headquarters add some or all of its strength to a particular stack? Often a headquarters only adds strength up to that of the units stacked with it. A headquarters with a strength of five and a unit of strength four will only give a final strength of eight, not nine. To state the obvious, always go for maximum strength when stacking.

Planning is the biggest aid to the Russian player. Nearly all the PGG games call for the Russian to be on the defensive, so a strong strategy is vital for the defense. A number of options are available and will depend on the game in question. Let us begin with

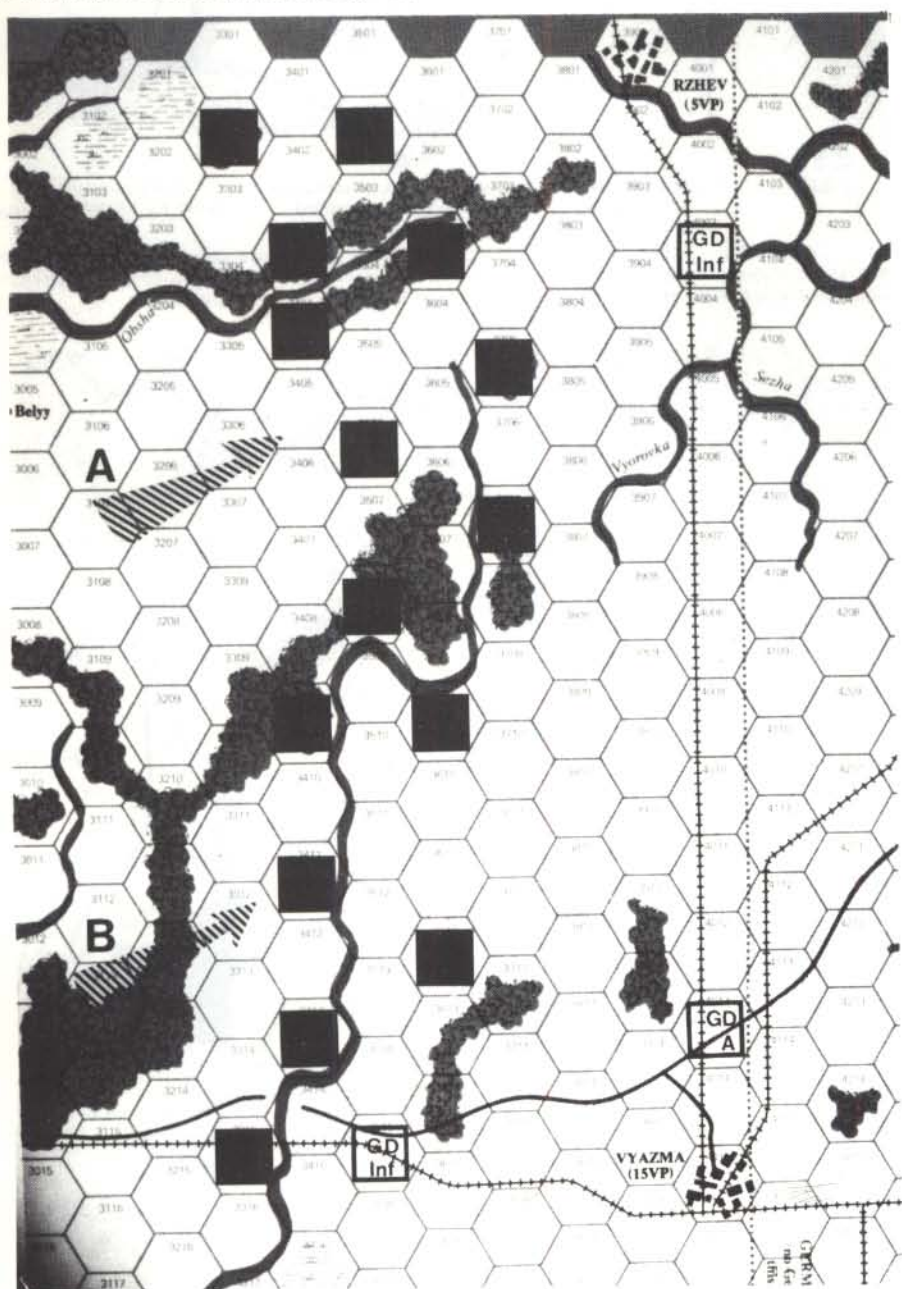
the worst, here we have isolated armies and headquarters defending towns and vital road /rail areas. Unfortunately this arrangement is playing into the Germans' hands, for each can be pocketed neatly at his pleasure and destroyed. However, if they are mutually supporting then they can trap German mechanised units, but it calls for fine co-ordination and a fair degree of luck. The next method is rather rare and depends on having a von Cluck facing you and not a von Kluge or Guderian. This is basically an attrition process whereby you feed units to the mechanised monsters who will happily eat them up, and have their rate of advance cut down dramatically. Ensuring supply to these units initially is vital, and if you are lucky enough to have an opponent willing enough to attack and attempt overruns on supplied untried stacks you are laughing. The major pre-requisite to this is that it must be done close to the main Soviet line, then once the German is firmly entangled he can be encircled and worn down by his own need to extricate himself. Above all, the Russian must not actually attack, and it can be rather unnerving as you debate whether or not the plan will work. Now we come to the third and best method, it has a simple name, retreat! Initially the Soviet forces are in a tangle with little relation to available terrain and cities. So, until a reasonable line can be made, give up ground, and victory points for that matter. Games such as Rostov and Drive on

Stalingrad even include disengagement rules which can help extricate those unfortunate units stuck out on a limb. Mind you, it can be advantageous to cover the retreat by leaving forces to hold major cities. If the retreat is too vigorous then the fast moving German panzers can turn your movement into a rout. So let the Germans pocket a few of your forces. If they are correctly laid out to gain the doubling effect of terrain, it can still take a while for the pocket method to work. The final defensive line should be set up with respect to a use of terrain. Rivers are good, especially major rivers, as zones of control prevent an enemy crossing over, also your own forces' strength will be tripled in defense, so even weak units have some hope here. The line must also be long, but it must also have depth. A single line of shoulder to shoulder units may look impenetrable, but once it is shattered it can be rolled up neatly with little effort. A system of depth can be achieved by having stacks with overlapping zones of control, and can be reinforced from the rear as the German attacks and becomes bogged down. If the system can be set up on a rail network, all the better, for strong units can be left in the defense but deployed on railways so that they can be redeployed to trouble spots or even for the eventual counter-attack. If defense and delay is the whole object of the exercise as on the southern section of Kharkov during the latter part of the game, the defense in depth can be set up in front of the defensive terrain/river. As the Soviet withdraws, the German is going to meet stronger and stronger defenses, and become more and more frustrated and tied down, as he advances. If an eventual counter-attack is required then the giving up of ground is going to encourage the German to be reckless. As an example, in PGG the line can be built up behind Smolensk, effectively giving the German a marginal victory on a plate. However, as he attempts to press on he will fall foul of the defense network and begin to take losses which are victory points to the Soviet. Limited counter-attacks in weak areas then add fuel to the fire and once the German is weakened and has spread his forces thin, the full onslaught can begin. What was a German victory now swings rapidly the other way.

Attack is necessary at some stage of the game and it is of great importance in such games as Operation Star and Korsun. Therefore, every item possible must be squeezed out of the system; combined arms; use of Guards; air attacks, the lot, must be borne in mind and applied rigidly. Overruns are possible, and though they can only be used in a limited manner quite often, they can reduce out of supply units caught in the defense web. One final feature of note is the determination of retreats. In some games retreats are decided upon by the opposing player. De-stacking a panzer division is very useful for the simple reason that the division cannot recombine and overrun immediately. To overrun, the attackers must all begin in the same hex. De-stacking thus negates the overrun advantage.

In conclusion then it is little wonder that the PGG system has generated such lasting interest. Tactical options vary tremendously from game to game, as does the actual playing of the scenarios. At the same time they are finely balanced and require great skill by both players. Supply considerations are of great value, as you may judge from my continual reminders of attack on unsupplied units. If this is your fancy, then I strongly recommend Drive on Stalingrad and Rostov.

In any case, no matter what your preference is within the series lets hope I have given some useful hints for your play. If you play the German, then you need the skills of a surgeon, using mechanised units as scalpels and forceps to cut out areas as you go. The German player is not a mystic, who invokes the magical phrase "Panzer Division" and hurls himself headlong into the fray. As a Russian player you need to be a good strategist and be able to view the entire map and the forces in play in a single pattern. Here the individual units are unimportant, it is the broad outline which is the deciding factor. So whichever you choose to be a Guderian or a Sukhov, good hunting and I hope you enjoy fighting on the Eastern front (without tears).



Soviet defence line showing the concept of defence in depth. Guards units placed on railway lines for ease of strategic transfer. Attack at A will fall foul of the two defensive lines; attack at B will allow the Russians to fall back on River Dnieper.