

WAR IN THE EAST ONE PLAYER'S EXPERIENCE

by Mark Saha

The Operation Barbarossa scenario of *War in the East* is so remarkable an experience as to be worth the price of the game alone — and will probably satisfy most gamers for quite some time, without feeling an immediate need to move on to the Campaign Game.

However, there's a slight problem with the play of northern Finland, for which I'd like to pass along a simple solution. The problem is that neither Petsamo nor Murmansk count anything for either side's Victory Conditions; as a result, they are simply abandoned while forces of both sides migrate south. This is not only boring for the Finnish front opponents, it's historically inaccurate. Hitler was afraid a Russian expedition from Murmansk would strike across the bare sixty miles to his nickel mines at Petsamo, which were vital to the German steel industry. The reason for his fear is obvious on the map; Murmansk is a rail center as well as a port, and so a good base of operations to sustain such an expedition. Petsamo, on the other hand, is rather remote and difficult for the Germans to reinforce quickly. (Remember, the Germans cannot use Finnish railroads until Leningrad has fallen.) Therefore, Operation Platinum Fox was outfitted at the very start of the Barbarossa Campaign and scheduled to get underway a few weeks after the main invasion. This German expedition hoped to catch Murmansk unprepared and capture it before Stalin had time to start getting funny ideas up there.

This was the importance of both Murmansk and Petsamo in context of the Barbarossa scenario (apart from the greater importance Murmansk was to assume later in the war). The problem, then, is to give these objectives sufficient value so they will not be simply abandoned by opponents there without over-emphasizing the objectives. And without cluttering up the Victory Conditions with trivia.

Simple. Let the capture of either of these objectives by the respective opponent count toward a DRAW but not a WIN. For example, if the German has captured five Personnel Centers (a German loss) the capture of Murmansk would make it six and give him a draw. But if the German had captured seven PC's (a draw) the capture of Murmansk would not give him a win. By the same token, if the German has captured eight PC's (German win), a Russian capture of Petsamo would knock the German down to seven and convert the game to a draw.

Thus, Petsamo/Murmansk cannot win the game for either Player, but can prevent him from losing if the game is close, converting

his loss to a draw. Moreover, an early capture of Murmansk by the Germans is good insurance against a loss and may allow him to take more chances on the main front. Thus, Operation Platinum Fox is encouraged.

I would like to offer a few hints to Players still looking forward to their first experience with this most remarkable game. The first piece of advice is "plan ahead." Although game mechanics of the Barbarossa scenario are actually simpler than *France, 1940*, the very size of *War in the East* makes it well worth the effort to plan out time and circumstances of gameplay well in advance. In my own case, some friends and I chose the Labor Day weekend, assuring us three days if necessary to reach a decision on the Barbarossa scenario. [Decision was reached 5 AM of the third day. Germany was losing, but took Kharkov for a draw on the 20th Game-Turn, after a brutal slugfest in the mud.] Obviously, it shouldn't take that long — except it was our first time at the game.

We were fortunate in that we had use of a house with sleeping facilities for up to eight people. We carefully chose invitations and gamers came over a hundred miles to play; most of them didn't have the game and were sent xeroxed copies of the rules a week in advance. The map was mounted on a solid sheet of masonite we were fortunate enough to borrow and it rested quite securely on a diningroom table. Unfortunately, we didn't use enough care in mounting the map, and suffered "buckling" problems throughout the game. Even if you have only one set of plastic map covers, they will be quite effective if placed over the frontier area from the border to Leningrad/Crimea. This is where the greatest "unit density" of the scenario fighting occurs.

We were also fortunate in that we had two copies of the game. The second game map was laid out (without units) on a large table in another room, where one team could retire for secret conferences before each Turn. The TEC was cut out of that map so that the German team could have a copy handy at their side of the battle board.

Each side had a supreme commander and a varied number of subordinates. The subordinate was not required to carry out orders, but could be sacked for failure to do so; however, this would not be a trivial decision on the part of the supreme commander, as it would mean throwing in a new Player "cold" on a front where his opponent was quite acquainted with the tactical subtleties of the situation. The supreme commander decided

who got reinforcements, and could withdraw or add units to a subordinate's command. This was quite important; for, if any enemy attack fell upon the "seam" between two subordinate commands, the SC would usually shift the seam by giving one subordinate an additional ten hexes of authority north or south of the attack point.

The substantial amount of care and planning described above — including arrangements for meals and sleeping — made for an excellent "first" game and left everybody spoiling for a rematch.

Finally, it's almost axiomatic that the first time at any game you're going to foul a few rules — or at least not take proper advantage of them. But because of the considerable logistical effort in getting gamers face-to-face across a *War in the East* mapsheet, you obviously want to reduce this to a minimum. So mention of a few boners and oversights in our own first effort may help others to achieve an even higher quality of play on their's.

(1) Although it isn't specifically stated in the rules, a glance at the TEC reveals that all land hexes are treated as clear terrain for infantry of both sides. Be aware of this and take tactical advantage of it.

(2) Moreover, constantly remember that mechanized units, including cavalry, have no ZOC's in swamps, forests and rough terrain. This is especially important during Russian withdrawal; we (Russian team) were constantly charging ourselves "withdrawal from Enemy ZOC" costs when we didn't have to do so. Moreover, when we realized the situation we actually had a chance to infiltrate and strike at Army Group Center's rail repair unit! It didn't work, but gave them quite a scare — and delayed them at least half a turn eliminating the threat and cleaning up the confusion.

Failure to notice whether or not an enemy unit had a ZOC was the most common oversight made throughout the game.

(3) The rules state that the Axis Player "must" attempt to maintain a continuous front. We interpret this to mean he does not have the option of not doing so if he prefers to pay the penalty. Therefore, the Russian should be obliged to point out any gaps left because of German oversight.

(4) The rules don't say whether Russian ZOC's extend across the frontier on Game-Turn One. This can be quite important. We assumed that they do, since a special exception to ZOC rules is required if this is not the case. [Ed. Note: ZOC's extend across

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the border from the instant that the first Axis unit crosses it.]

(5) Sea transfer can be quite important, at least in the south (I'm not much aware what happened in the Baltic, and haven't had opportunity to discuss it with Players who served there). Thus, playing Russia I executed a swift southern withdrawal, but left a garrison at Odessa to distract the Germans. The Germans bypassed it and thought they could mop it up at leisure. So I was able to sea transfer a "4-4" from Novorossisk to Odessa; as a result, Odessa did not fall until late in the game and took considerable pressure off Kharkov in the process.

(6) When the Russians are defending an important entrenched area, they should consider carefully whether they are likely to be assaulted by the German armor or infantry. If there is no armor in the area, two "4-4" units are best under the entrenched counter. If preparing for an armored assault, a "4-4" and an anti-tank gun is far superior. Thus, it's also important to keep track of German armor; we (Russians) took quite a hit when some German armor we neglected to keep track of in transit suddenly appeared in the Donets basin.

Correct use of Russian anti-tank guns — getting them in front of German armor after the German has outrun his supply lines — can easily decide the game as much as anything else.

(7) Simple as the air rules are, we hopelessly botched them in playing the game. Probably because they *are* so simple, nobody bothered to give them careful attention. Fortunately, we don't feel it seriously affected the outcome of the game. But it is important, so be forewarned.

The supreme commander made the decision about Strategic Air commitment; but only (especially the Germans) after secret conferences with subordinates, to determine their needs in terms of ground support and interdiction.

We interpreted the air rules to read that if the Russian Player made no commitment whatever of available air points, he could not be attacked. This allows him to keep his air force "in being" as a constant threat; especially since, with time, the German Player is going to be increasingly dependent upon Luftwaffe ground support and interdiction. Thus, when mud hits, the Russians may actually have opportunity for air support of one of their own ground counter-attacks.

Truly an incredible game experience. SPI should make a special lapel button available to any/all gamers who have served on this mapsheet — win or lose. Also, the first gamer to accidentally overturn a *War in the East* map with game in progress ought to have his picture on the front cover of *S&T*, complete with "full details" of the lynching. ●●