

## PROFILE &amp; CRITIQUE

# ERIC GOLDBERG'S KURSK

## Intensity in the East

by Thomas Hudson

I know I'm eventually going to get a lot of questions as to why I made Eric's name so big on the *Kursk* gamebox (and John Hill's on the *Battle for Stalingrad* gamebox). Well, partly it's to distinguish between this brand new *Kursk* game and the old *Kursk* game. The Goldberg design is a completely new game that doesn't resemble the old one in much of anything. Of course, there's another reason for the big designers' names, but you're going to have to guess that one.

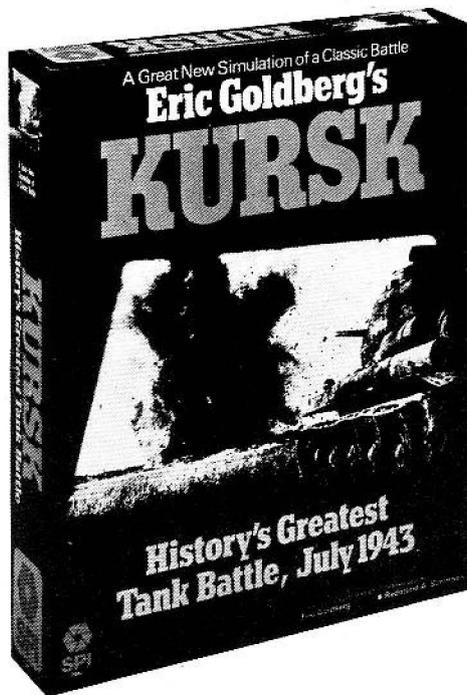
—RAS

Finally, the long awaited and much heralded game on one of the epic battles of WWII — *Kursk* — has been published by SPI. *Eric Goldberg's Kursk* (the title makes one wonder if we are entering an era of "famous" game designers) is a complex game, and, in the words of the designer, a "most ambitious undertaking." *Kursk* is a major effort, taking well over a year to produce, and deserves an in-depth analysis. Readers of this magazine, as well as of *S&T*, have, no doubt, followed the on-again, off-again progress of *Kursk*, from its original inception as a *PGG* spin-off, designed by Brent Nosworthy, to its totally redesigned version by Mr. Goldberg.

Mr. Goldberg seems to represent the "historical analysis intensive" school of game design (if *all* the information is there, the game will take care of itself) as opposed to the "design for effect" school, perhaps best represented by John Hill. For example, Mr. Hill's latest effort, *Battle for Stalingrad*, which has counters with little or no historical information on them, is indicative of an approach to design that dismisses much of the information dear to Mr. Goldberg as irrelevant toward the achievement of his ends, which are, generally, *entertainment* and the creation of a certain "feel" for the subject. I find it interesting that SPI has recently published games by both gentlemen: *Eric Goldberg's Kursk* and *John Hill's Battle for Stalingrad*.

The amount of research and information in *Kursk* is staggering. *Kursk* can almost be considered an historical document (something almost unheard of in the hobby). How much of the information is necessary and important is something else again, but Mr. Goldberg has presented the owner of *Kursk* with probably the most accurate O.B. ever devised for an East Front game. Players would be well advised to spend considerable time absorbing the lengthy O.B. information

before attempting to play the game. Players are urged to forego the Optional Command System Rules (11.5) and get the thing right to begin with — you wouldn't want to render most of the information pointless, would you? *Kursk* is a complex affair, and players should not sit down to play unless they are willing to spend a considerable amount of time studying the game and planning. (In this respect the game resembles the award winning *Green Fields Beyond*).



Before scaring off those who run for the hills at the first hint of complexity, let me say that the game mechanics are *relatively* easy to assimilate. Although the game is fairly innovative in many areas (the combat routine is especially interesting), *Kursk* remains a distant cousin to *Panzergruppe Guderian* and other *PGG* system related games. I suspect that Mr. Goldberg would resent any comparison to *PGG* system games, but, be that as it may, the familiar old bones are there in *Kursk*. Players already familiar with overrun, mech movement and so on will have an excellent jumping off point when trying to master *Kursk*. As for the rest, a complete course in army administration for only \$15 is quite a bargain.

Setting up the game is a *pain*. Even though the game includes lengthy O.B. information and various playing aids, the sheer amount of information is, at first, over-

whelming. To facilitate set-up, the game includes two Deployment Displays: one Soviet (broken down into fronts) and one German (broken down into armies). As helpful as that is, perhaps the most useful touch for set-up, and for play of the game, are the counters themselves. A *Kursk* set-up is a very attractive visual array; the German counters are in various shades of gray and green (each army having its own individual shade) and the Soviet counters are in shades of orange, red, and pink (according to front). The visual presentation not only speeds set-up (cutting down a seemingly endless task to a manageable two hours) but also greatly eases play. The counters also indicate which units are capable of mech movement, a capability represented by yet another band of color.

### The Mechanics of Kursk

The basic sequence of play follows rather closely that of *PGG*. First, both players participate in a rather abstract Air War Phase (the air game is given as an optional rule, but I suggest its use as it is fairly simple to perform and adds a nice seasoning to the game). The German player then moves his units in the Initial Movement Phase, performing overruns as he goes. Movement is greatly affected by a unit's mode (a very important concept in the game). The three voluntary modes a unit can be in are: mobile (units are always considered in mobile mode unless otherwise designated by a neutral counter), assault, and static. Units in static or assault modes have only half their normal movement allowance and may not perform overruns.

After the Initial Movement Phase comes the First Segment Combat. Units in static mode may not attack (though they receive beneficial shifts on the CRT when attacked — static mode is the defensive mode). Units in assault mode may attack twice, creating in effect two rounds of combat.

Following combat comes the Mechanized Movement Phase in which units may once again perform overruns. After the Mech Movement Phase, the German player-turn is concluded with the Disruption Removal and Reorganization Phases.

The movement system follows fairly standard lines once modes have been determined. Units must stop when entering enemy ZOC's, though units may exit ZOC's at the beginning of the Movement Phase by expanding movement points. German units may "infiltrate" — move from ZOC directly to ZOC — in the first Movement Phase only. Rail movement is presented with two lines:

single track and double track.

Overrunning units that lose steps while overrunning may continue movement, the single criterion for a successful overrun being whether or not the defending unit retreats from the hex. Defending units that retreat as a result of overrun also become disrupted. Disrupted units may neither move nor attack, though they continue to exert ZOC's.

Stacking is by the point (not to be confused with steps); 6 points may stack in a hex, which works out per hex to three German or two Soviet units (not including anti-tank or artillery units, which stack additionally).

The combat system is one of the many unique features of *Kursk*. The combat procedure involves two segments: the Gun Segment and the Combat Segment. In the Gun Segment, anti-tank units stacked with the defending units "attack" the attacking units. Attacking steps lost in the Gun Segment are lost before the attack is carried out. The attacking strength may be further decreased by defending artillery units. This procedure is called suppression. Surviving attacking units *then* apply their attack strength against the defending units.

Combat units in *Kursk* do not have a defense strength *per se*; rather, the step value of the defending units serve to modify the attack die-roll. The attacking strength may be further modified by a number of column shifts on the CRT. The attacking strength can be favorably modified by artillery units (called barrage) in the form of column shifts for the Soviets and an addition of strength points for the Germans. Besides column shifts for terrain and modes, there are shifts for air points and the composition of the defending stack (units stacked together from different armies or fronts or in independent command receive an unfavorable shift on the CRT). Combat results are in either "steps lost," "hexes retreated," or a combination of both. The mode of the defending units strictly limits the number of hexes they may retreat. The mode may also either increase or decrease the intensity of combat in terms of losses.

Mr. Goldberg's rules are generally clear and concise; however, he occasionally drifts into some quite inaccessible passages. One example is taken from the retreat section: "A unit is retreated three hexes. Optimally, the shortest route from the hex in which it ends its retreat to the hex from which it was retreated is three hexes." Ah.....

An interesting note here: *Kursk* has a modified version of the *PGG* untried unit system. Some Soviet rifle divisions have a "?" in place of the unit's designation (not combat values). When such a unit takes a step loss, the unit is flipped over to reveal its "surprise" value. Some of these units have a "0" value and are removed from play once they have taken a step loss.

### Headquarters and Command

The heart of the *Kursk* game system is the Headquarters-Command System. Headquarters affect almost every aspect of the game. Combat units are considered to be in the same mode as their HQ. Generally, for a

unit to be in supply, it must be able to trace a Line of Communications to its parent HQ. Units are given a limited ability to trace supply without the use of HQ's, but this method is much less efficient. A Line of Communications is always 7 hexes, which is unaffected by enemy ZOC's or units! Once a Line of Communications has been established, the HQ itself must be in supply in order to serve as a source of supply. A disrupted HQ cannot function as a source of supply. A unit that is either out of supply or unable to trace a Line of Communication has its movement allowance halved and may not conduct overruns. A unit out of supply has its combat strength halved. A limited number of units may be designated as *independent command*.

The command and supply systems are very important in the play of *Kursk*; the players must always keep in mind the organization of their various army formations. Since supply is determined at the instant of combat, there is considerable in-fighting, giving the game a nice tactical feel.

HQ's also supply the German units with anti-tank and artillery points (the Soviet anti-tank and artillery are represented by individual counters). The German player is thus faced with a dilemma; he must decide whether or not to keep his HQ's out of harm's way or to bring them close to the scene of action in support of his units. I find that problems like this presented to the player always add enjoyment and interest to a game.

Another nice feature of *Kursk* is the deployment of the Soviet artillery and anti-tank units. They come in various strengths, and before play starts they are all inverted so neither player knows their exact strength. Then the Soviet player chooses a limited number of them and deploys them as he sees fit, not knowing their actual strength until used. The deployment of the artillery and anti-tank units is very important, so the Soviet player should take some care with their placement.

Both players have the capacity to "breakdown" a limited number of their units into smaller formations. The mechanics for breakdown are rather simple.

Once players have digested the rules on mechanics, they then move on to the infamous Scenario Format section of the rules. As mentioned previously, setting up one of the scenarios is not an easy task. Initially, all HQ's called for in the scenario are placed on the map; players generally have no leeway in the placement of Headquarters. The combat units themselves are placed on the map as the owning player sees fit so long as they meet the following criteria: 1) they are placed on their own side of the front; 2) they are placed in supply and communication; and 3) every front line hex is either occupied or in the ZOC of a friendly unit.

This brings us to the most confusing and convoluted part of the rules — The Order of Battle and Set-up Sections. Each combat unit has at least one of 21 possible "indicator letters" printed on it. The indicator letter tells whether or not a unit is in play at the beginn-

ing of the scenario, if the unit begins off-map as a possible reinforcement, if the unit is not involved in the scenario at all, and finally if the unit begins play at reduced strength. In the scenario I played, there were 6 indicator letters indicating various units were in-play, 8 indicating various units were possible reinforcements, and 7 showing which units weren't in play at all!

There are no introductory scenarios in *Kursk*. All three scenarios are complete games that use the whole map and the majority of the counters.

As a final note before moving on to an actual playing of *Kursk*, there are surprisingly few charts included in the game, and of those, the majority are playing aids. The designer should especially be commended for the inclusion of the Miscellaneous Information Table, which serves as a general review of the rules that are most easily forgotten and would otherwise have to be looked up.

### Kursk in Action

The May scenario is not the historical scenario, but rather a hypothetical one presented by Mr. Goldberg as an important "what-if." The actual historical battle is represented by the July scenario: *Hitler's Plan*. Mr. Goldberg states in the July scenario commentary that the Battle of Kursk was a foredoomed affair forced on the German General Staff by Hitler. Because Mr. Goldberg hints that this scenario is somewhat unbalanced against the Germans, one has the impression that it would be boring to play. But, in all fairness to the designer, I will reserve further comment until I play it. The August scenario, *The Beginning of the End*, simulates the Soviet counterattack, and promised to be an engaging game, but again, I haven't played that scenario, so I won't say anything further.

The May scenario simulates the attack planned by the German General Staff in order to catch the Soviets before their Siberian reinforcements could arrive. But Hitler wanted to wait until his armies could be reinforced with the new *Panther* tanks. The result was the fiasco of Kursk. Mr. Goldberg maintains that the General Staff's plan (Von Manstein's plan) was the German's best chance.

The special rules for the scenario indicate that many of the reinforcements (for both players) are conditional and won't enter play until "triggered." The German reinforcements are triggered if any German unit reaches Lgov, or if a German unit comes to within two hexes of Kursk. As those two hexes are centrally located, and the capture of them practically assures the German player of victory (they are worth 50 of the 71 victory points needed to win), they are the obvious objectives.

The Soviet player begins the game with a healthy portion of his army in reserve. Until these reserves are activated, they can take little part in the game. Reserves can be activated in two ways: 1) if the German player attacks them, or 2) if the Soviet player "spends" 1 victory point. Once activated the German player receives 1 victory point per

game-turn until game-turn 8. This is another dilemma for the German player (choices like this are always desirable in a game) — to activate or not to activate.

Practically all of the Soviet reinforcements are conditional, and predicated on German actions. Soviet reinforcements are activated if the German player captures various cities (including Lgov and Kursk) and if a German unit enters a "trigger" hex. Trigger hexes are a line of hexes that run behind the Soviet front line, generally at a distance of three to four hexes.

Kursk and Lgov are in the center of a huge pocket (The Kursk Pocket), surrounded on three sides by German units. The Germans have three powerful panzer armies on the south facing a relatively weak force in the Voronezh Front. On the north the Germans are strong too, but face a powerful defensive force in the Central Front troops. As the game is only nine game-turns long, my initial plan was to attack hard almost the entire length of the front, especially at the bases of the pocket, both in an attempt to reduce it and, in the process, perhaps destroy the entire Soviet Army. The Soviet forces outside the pocket were not inconsiderable and had to be kept in mind.

The German player has a slight edge in the initial set-up because the Soviet player must deploy his units first, thereby letting the German player know the modes of his opponent before he deploys. B.F. (my opponent) deployed his units in the pocket in static mode, those a little farther away in mobile mode and those farthest away in assault mode. On the first Game-Turn I placed all but those units farthest away from the pocket in assault mode. The rest I placed in mobile mode.

On Game-Turn one, I attacked all along the line in a manner that sent paroxysms of glee through B.F. One lesson I learned immediately was: mass. MASS! In order for any attack to be effective, the weight of attack must be massed at key locations. Another quick lesson was that players should generally mix the modes of their units and keep some units in mobile mode; it's delightful to be able to soften up the defense with overruns. A related point is that anti-tank units are quite brittle defending against overruns. Surprisingly, I made some progress against the northern side of the pocket, capturing Dmitriyev-L'gorsky and destroying the 60/CF HQ. The progress I made against the northern side of the pocket I attribute to B.F.'s somewhat poor deployment. B.F. did not stack his weaker units (admittedly the appearance of Soviet strength on this front is illusionary), and because of the nature of the defense system, stacks with low step value actually help the attacker.

As it turned out, the cost for my success in the north was steep. To gain weight for my attacks around Olkhovatka, I had stripped my lines around Orel. The result was a vicious Soviet counterattack. Luckily, B.F. couldn't take full advantage of my blunder because most of his units were weak. The counterattack didn't reach Orel.

In the south I made good progress,

reaching to within one hex of Oboyan. I had initially decided to let the sleeping giant lie and not drive toward locales that would trigger Soviet reserves — except those locales in the pocket itself: Kursk, Lgov and Oboyan.

I almost panicked when the Soviet player counterattacked toward Kharkov while my units melt away. The Soviet attack reached to within two hexes of Kharkov.

On Game-Turn Two, I had mixed success: I captured Oboyan, Lgov and reached to within two hexes of Kursk. However, some of the blunders I made on the first Game-Turn came back to haunt me. B.F. was able to cut me up pretty bad around Oboyan and actually drove me out of the city, though with very heavy losses. He continued to attack in the Orel area but he called off his attacks around Kharkov, throwing those forces into the fight around Belgorod.

On Game-Turn Three, I retook Oboyan and came to within one hex of Kursk, at a cost that proved to be disastrous. B.F. almost eliminated my entire force around Kursk, destroying three whole divisions! He retook Oboyan in decisive fashion, although his drive to retake Lgov proved to be ineffective. Seeing that I had stripped my northern line in order to defend Orel, B.F. attacked toward Bryansk. His initial success almost devastated me, but luckily the Soviet forces were weak. Another lesson learned.

On Game-Turn Four, I was able to cut through and save the rest of my forces around Kursk. However, with the arrival of two Soviet reserve armies I could see the handwriting on the wall. I would never be able to retake Kursk and even though the Soviet losses were high, mine more than offset them. I conceded a tactical Soviet victory.

### After-Action Report

*Kursk* is not a game with lightning penetration and deep thrusts; it does reward the careful planner. *Kursk* is a game that cannot be mastered easily. A game between two inexperienced players can be a rather dull, sloppy affair, with little action and lots of breaks to look up details in the rules. This is not a criticism of the game, however. Once mastered, the game is an absorbing and interesting simulation, with many subtleties. One can even admire the intricate workings of the many parts and sub-systems. The rules are generally clear and there were no major lapses or glitches in the rules that rendered the game unplayable.

*Kursk* is not a game to approach lightly; it is akin to a monster game even though it has but one map. In our game we spent a good two hours on each game-turn, probably the norm for even experienced players. Nor can *Kursk* be recommended for those that are put off by complexity. For those who do not mind complexity and have a large chunk of time to invest in it, the game can be vastly rewarding.

### A Critical Analysis

As far as I am concerned, the designer has indeed attained his goals. He has given players a truly impressive O.B. that must stand as a standard of excellence in the

industry. He has created a simulation that requires hard work and rewards that work. He has given players a complex and intricate game that can delight those who perceive its subtleties, and he has accomplished all this with great ability.

For all of the game's achievements, I can't give myself over to unqualified praise. I can't whip up much enthusiasm for the game. I would guess that's the way Mr. Goldberg feels about it too. I can't picture the designer getting *Kursk* off his shelf to play it....ever. Now is that necessarily a criticism?

This judgment is perhaps uncalled for, but the nature of Mr. Goldberg's achievement thrusts the game in the forefront of the hobby in many ways. With *Kursk*, a game which is clearly state-of-the-art, one gets the feeling that it is a competent design, a rehash of many "good" game systems, by a designer who delights in complexity for no other reason than to display his considerable talents. One feels that the designer would never want to play this game, that for him there are no absorbing concepts or problems that attract and excite him to further creation.

The designer should be justly proud, in that he has achieved his aims: layers of complexity that do hold together. One only regrets that the designer (for all his ambition) set his goals too low.

### Erratum

The city of Belgorod (1520) should have a Victory Point value of "2/10." ■■

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