

MOVES IN ENGLISH edited by Charles Vasey

KURSK

by Bob Malin

The Eastern Front seems to exercise a very great effect upon the boardgaming hobby. I have never seen the attraction of two of the nastiest political systems in the world hacking at each other. Maybe it is the overtones of Gotterdammerung that appeals. Whatever, and however, Kursk as a battle seems to have attracted great interest as a clash of titans. It has been the subject of several games over the years but Eric Goldberg's swansong game is perhaps the oddest (or is that original?) of them all, and it's for this reason that I prevailed upon Bob Malin who actually enjoys this subject to test and review the game. I can only marvel at his stamina! — CHV

With the possible exception of Stalingrad, the battle of Kursk must be the most talked about episode of the war on the Eastern Front. Stalingrad showed that the Germans were not invincible; Kursk ripped the heart out of the military machine that came close to dominating Europe.

The preface to Kursk was the brilliant recovery by the German forces after the hammer blow of "Operation Star" — the Soviet offensive in February, Kursk and Belgorod being captured on the 9th, and Kharkov on the 17th of that month. Manstein had managed to overcome Hitler's "stand-fast" mania and succeeded in keeping the mobile forces more or less intact. By the middle of March these mobile forces had recaptured Kharkov. Then the most influential general of the war intervened — General Mud — thus effectively ending any decisive actions for both sides. The Germans were re-established on the Mius-Donet line and the Soviets controlled the Kursk-Lgov salient.

As early as the 12th of February, Hitler had been issuing orders in preparation for his summer offensive. If the Germans were going to truly regain the initiative on the Eastern Front, then the Kursk salient had to be eliminated as soon as possible, before the Soviets had a fully coordinated defensive network. During the weeks that followed, the build-up of both sides (or lack of it in the case of Germans) caused the jump off date to be put back further and further as the Germans got into the "Catch-22" situation of needing tanks to break through the Russian defenses, only to see the defense strengthen so that they needed yet more tanks — until the scale was tilted irrevocably against the German assaulting forces.

With hindsight it is easy to see that Kursk was a battle that should never have happened as it was one of the most one-sided contests in history; indeed, it might never have occurred had not one very powerful man become obsessed with an impossible dream.

In terms of game design Kursk would seem to be an impossible dream, yet Eric Goldberg accepted the task. Indeed, he goes to great lengths to tell us about the large amount of blood and sweat put into the "most ambitious undertaking of my professional career." All I can say is — I tried, Eric, I really did try. In fact I spent more time on this game than any other I have played in the past three years. In eight playings occupying nearly one hundred hours of playing time, I am left with very mixed feelings.

In issue 14 of *The Wargamer* John Hill stated the following: "Reviewers and critics tend to apply the same yardsticks to all games, despite their potential dissimilarity. To my knowledge there has been almost no attempt to look at games as to what their intended purpose is. As an example let the designer clearly state what his pre-design intent was, and then either applaud or crucify him on the judgement of how well he obtained that goal." What follows is a review of *Kursk* following precisely those guidelines.

Six times on the game box the claim is made that it contains a simulation of "Kursk — History's Greatest Tank Battle." Only once is mention made that it really contains a game. If Mr. Goldberg wants me to review his effort as a simulation he can expect a fair amount of criticism; as a game I can give him praise for creating a situation that opens up many options for players and creating a quite high level of excitement.

For a simulation to be successful, it must teach players the lessons of history regardless of the variation of the strategy applied by the players. Historically, the Germans learned that it was difficult, to say the least, to achieve a decisive breakthrough when you have to fight through a network of fortifications 110 miles deep in places. How do you simulate the cool calculating manner in which the Russians blunted the Blitzkrieg that was unleashed on the 5th of July 1943? The answer is...with extreme difficulty.

The average wargamer does not have the resources to read extensively into the details of any particular battle, but even the average amount of research will show that the Germans were unable to use their superior morale, weapons and training in the way that had given them so much success in the past. The most important factor in reducing their effectiveness was lack of mobility — I now quote an extract from *War Monthly No. 1* in which they quote a German officer:

"For all our bitter struggling in the North we moved virtually nowhere — we stood still. It was like Verdun in 1916....Each

time the smoke cleared away we saw Teptoye again, but it was like a mirage, we never got any nearer."

Another quote, this time by Stalin to the Supreme Soviet:

"We were an immovable mass against which the fascists tried to pitch an irresistible force. A scientific impossibility....They never had a chance."

It is clear that any attempt at simulating the German assault on the Kursk salient must emphasize the grinding down of the erstwhile invincible mobile forces. In theory the rules are very tight in allowing forward movement through modes and advance after combat; in practice this is insufficient (allowing the Germans to move their full movement allowance during the mechanised movement phase seems too generous).

Other elements which need to be brought out through the game to make it a simulation include the lack of imagination which the Germans showed in both the planning and execution of their operations and the cloudburst of the 5th of July that broke the banks of the River Pena, slowing the advance of 48 Panzer Korps, as well as stranding tanks which were picked off by the Red Air Force. The bombing of the German railhead at Poltava is another feature which seems to be lacking in this effort to confront the players with a simulation of Kursk.

In my eight playings the results were as follows: *German Strategic Victory 2*, *Tactical Victory 4*, *Draw 2*; *Russian Victory 0*. It seemed difficult for the Germans *not* to make an early and decisive breakthrough. For example, while playing the May scenario, Lgov was captured on Game-Turn *One!* Kursk was regularly being captured by Game-Turn Six. At first I thought I was playing the game using the wrong set of rules — my set is now in shreds, having been checked time and time again to insure that we were interpreting the rules correctly. The above results were achieved by the obvious strategy of not attacking north/south, but rather by making the *schwerpunkt* of the main attacks three or four hexes west of the original. The aim being to unite the armored thrusts in the Lgov area to create a major drive on Kursk.

Other historical lessons which seem to be incorrectly portrayed by the "simulation" concern the ubiquitous dragonsteeth. First, let me quote an extract from SPI's study *The Russian Front*: "The actual defense was based on a system of strongpoints, coupled with minefields. Each strongpoint had three to five guns, some anti-tank rifles, mortars, some sappers and a machine-gun section.

Those strongpoints in the vulnerable positions had up to twelve anti-tank guns... To augment these strongpoints, minefields were deployed with a density of 2400 mines per mile of front and 2700 anti-personnel mines in the same area."

Marshal Rokossovski, joint commander on the Kursk front, was to say that these minefields were so dense "you could not have put one of Goering's medals between them." Yet this complex fortified system is represented on the map by dragonsteeth — giving the impression that the Germans were being delayed by rows of pyramidal concrete blocks. Admittedly these were used, but the understanding of the situation confronting the protagonists would have been more accurate if a better impression of the defensive network had been given.

As mentioned earlier, I felt that I was not playing the game as it should be played, but this feeling is compounded by the Player's Notes, from which I quote: "The German player will often be faced with a solid Soviet line which, almost as often, he can break."

Historically, the Germans proved themselves incapable of penetrating the Soviet lines to the degree in which James Smolen takes joy in telling the Soviet player will happen and how this event is to be countered.

Time and time again, we see rules that fall short of giving a true reflection of the real effects of the historical systems. One shining example is the use of anti-tank units. In his designer's notes Eric Goldberg states that "The Soviet anti-tank guns blunted many a German offensive throughout the two weeks of battle"; in the game, however, the anti-tank units are lucky to knock the odd step or two out of a German stack before disappearing into thin air, despite a contrived rule reducing their losses. This leads me on to the Combat Results Table itself.

On careful examination of the possible outcomes, I failed to see any logic to it at all — all it forces the attacker to do is make purely mathematical attacks, as any attacks within the 23-42 bracket are less cost effective than using fewer attack factors.

When one sees these inaccuracies within a game, one gets the feeling that there must be a good reason as the designer is obviously trying to give the correct "feel" rather than the correct effect, but I can see little if any justification.

For example, historically the Germans only achieved anything like a major breakthrough after 8 days (4 turns) of intensive fighting. In playing the game using historical lines of advance, the Germans can advance at least double this rate of advance despite the tight-fisted advance after combat rules.

The game system just does not strip away the mobility of the German armored forces which was the foundation stone of their success throughout the war. The Soviets succeeded in forcing the Germans into an attritional set piece battle. The simulation of Kursk fails in this respect.

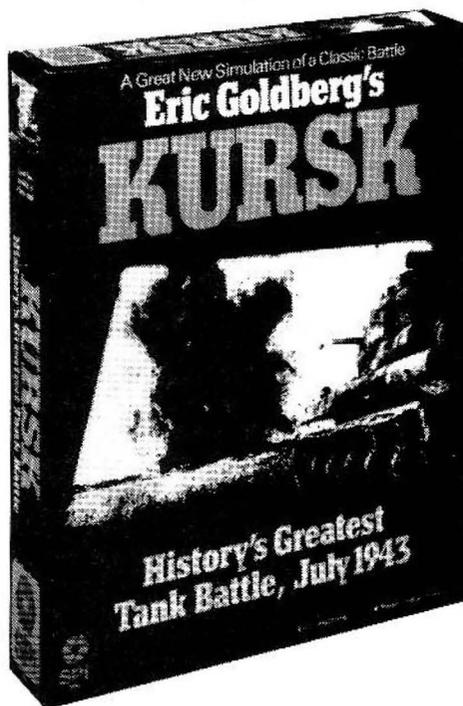
Kursk: The Game

As a game *Kursk* achieves its aim to a much greater degree! Many innovations are brought into the game which enliven the interest of those fans of the *Panzergruppe Gu-*

derian system. *Kursk* is obviously not suited to the basic *PGG* system and is in need of a unique game system to reflect the uniqueness of the situation. As shown above, the game's system as such fails to simulate the Battle of Kursk, but it does succeed in giving the players plenty to think, panic and sweat about, albeit in ahistorical situations.

Much is done to aid the players in setting up the game — the use of OB charts and the paraphrasing of salient points of the rules on the tables and charts are particularly useful. The piece de resistance is the color-coding of the counters for army organisation. I can only hope we see use made of this in future games.

Considering that three different set-ups are required and there is a limit to the amount of information that can be put on a half-inch square counter, the system of indicator codes used is a good idea. However, the initial deployment lists could have been laid out in a less eye straining manner.



When discussing the playthroughs of the game, I did not include the three false starts caused by inaccurate reading of the rules. This has always been a moot point as to who creates these problems. I am prepared to give ground on this point, but some important points were buried deep within the generally well laid out rules.

We all know about the intense effort put into creating "The most complete Order of Battle ever seen in a game," and Eric Goldberg should be applauded for his very worthy efforts, but as many readers in the computer industry will know, you can have the best software in the world but it can be rendered useless if the hardware is faulty.

The hardware of *Kursk* is its game system. There are some very nice original ideas and interesting variations on themes gleaned from previous productions. At first sight it looked like being a great system, one to dislodge even the *PGG* system. In practice it was a struggle to make all those nice ideas coalesce into the unique whole needed to give it that spark of true originality.

Air Warfare. There was nothing too original here. The system abstracts the historical use of aircraft in their wide-scale use as tank busters.

Artillery and Anti-Tank. This too at first sight looked like a very good idea for simulating the different doctrines of the opponents, yet this could not be easily fitted into the Combat Results Table except through the contrived rule of halving anti-tank losses. Artillery comes nearer to the mark in its effects, especially in creating the prodigious Soviet barrages crucial to their success.

Modes. This must be considered the game's crowning glory. This system simply must be used in future games as this concept does more than any previous game in showing the doctrinal differences of the two military machines. It is clear, concise and has the desired effect. If only the other subsystems had been developed to the same degree.

Steps. The idea of the use of steps to show the staying power of units was another idea which looked excellent in theory, yet in practice did not bring about historical results. I was not able to glean any accurate figures for Soviet losses from my reading, but the Soviet deadpile in all our games seemed too large. The inability of the Soviets to add replacement steps to front line units seems hard, as the opportunity to pull out units for allocation of these replacements were very few and far between; often 5 or 6 much-needed replacement points were unused. I feel sure that the Soviets did have more staying power in their infantry divisions than portrayed in the game. Without the two or three column shift benefit of the entrenchments they are easy meat for attacking forces.

The cogs of the combat system may not mesh smoothly but it does integrate more elements into a CRT than a number of games I could mention. As mentioned earlier I have never considered myself as a "mathematical" wargamer — calculating the exact number of points required to obtain an objective — but after discovering the quirks of the CRT I found myself forced into that frame of mind (with good reason for when conducting attacks outside the 14-22 point bracket, the equivalent of 3-4 divisions were saved on earlier games in which losses had been equivalent to 9-11 panzer divisions!). Attacks in the 23-42 bracket did result in horrific attrition for both sides but more in favour of the defenders. The attacker only has advantages in the 36-42 or higher columns, with average shift changes thus requiring all attacks to consist of 50+ points — i.e., three panzer divisions plus artillery support and infantry cannon fodder. (I can only assume this was the designer's intention).

The final proof that the system is not one suitable for that which it was designed to portray is when one sees the number of contrived "special" rules required to simulate the Soviet counteroffensive. Was the German staying power so much better in their own defenses than the Soviet's tremendous efforts that the Soviets needed so many pluses to achieve the desired effect? After one solo attempt at the August scenario I thought better of trying it face to face.

From everything I have said up to now, most readers will probably think that I hated

the game. This couldn't be farther from the truth. I didn't like the simulation of the battle but I thought the "game" was great. I must have to have played it eight times. I have never had so many last turn cliffhangers in a game.

The game relied so much on the occupancy of Kursk and Orel. As the Soviet player all my efforts were aimed at capturing Orel once my reinforcements were triggered by the German capture of Lgov. But the Germans had normally offset the balance so far in their favor that they could reinforce against a threat on Orel and still have sufficient strength to capture and hold Kursk against the offensive potential available to the Soviets at that stage of the game — in the two strategic victories outcomes Kursk was being held by four very battered steps of the once glorious 2nd SS Panzer Korps!

As the German player one does well to follow most of James Smolen's advice, except that the main aim should be to link both thrusts — regardless of losses — to stand any chance of having sufficient force to capture Kursk. Also, never waste forces in reducing Soviet units if they can be cut off (thanks to good old infiltration movement — you should have listened to your playtesters, Eric).

The Soviet player seems to lack the mobility in crucial areas — particularly in his vital defense weapons, the anti-tank guns, which, as Class II units, struggle through friendly entrenchments trying to join stacks sufficiently strong to deter enemy assault. More often than not, they were overrun for their trouble after falling behind their accompanying forces.

Soviet mobility is further impeded by the less than helpful rail net and the strict rules applied to their use. If the German player is careful in the timing of his attacks that will trigger the reinforcements, he can be sure

that these forces will not interfere too much with his offensive designs. These ahistorical restraints thus force the Soviet player to keep a large proportion of his anti-tank forces in reserve, awaiting the inevitable German breakthrough.

The German player can find a great deal of success for very little effort. His efforts should be based on careful planning of attacks designed to rip holes in the Soviet front regardless of the state of the defense prepared by his opponent. Despite warnings to the contrary, he is able to shift forces from the line if they cannot make any headway to points more likely to achieve a breakthrough. Once Lgov succumbs to the inevitable the only tenable Soviet-defense line is four vital hexes nearer to Kursk. The German player will then have at least one turn to organise his hammer blow assault and keep his supply lanes free of interference from partisans and the like. Psychological warfare is another weapon in the Wehrmacht's arsenal, especially if the armored forces achieve the large penetrations early in the game. The Soviet player is likely to be distracted from his attacks on Orel and Belgorod if an early threat is likely to capture Kursk.

As a game, *Kursk* is certainly a strain on the grey matter for both players and can be fun in a morbid way. Success does not depend on the whims of the die but rather on the differing abilities of the players to organise and coordinate their forces to gain most benefit from the rules. Unfortunately this puts less, rather than more, pressure on the German player, thus throwing simulation out of the window; the Germans should have been made to sweat and strain for every hex gained — just as they did historically.

In summary, I hope that I have stayed within my brief by reviewing the game as the designer demanded — i.e., as a simulation of

the climactic episode in the history of the War in the East. I feel too much effort was expended on the OB to the detriment of development of systems truly capable of reflecting the problems faced by the two sides. I wouldn't have lost any sleep had the OB been slightly inaccurate if in return I had played a game which had taught me the problems faced by a commander trying to crack a toughened walnut with a small hammer. Instead I was shown how this hammer could first shatter the shell and then batter the nut into submission.

The game is held together by a number of good ideas which only succeed in creating a rather shallow and gimmicky feel. In spite of everything going against it, the game manages to provide an extremely tight and tense situation for the opponents to surmount. Unfortunately this was not the designer's *stated* intention and in consequence he cannot accept the praise that this achievement would ordinarily warrant.

The history of the world contains many "what-ifs." Games too follow the same trends; what would *Kursk* the game have been like if the designer had had more time, more money for more counters, a bigger map and so forth? Historically the Germans were lacking in critical areas; the game reflects many of the problems encountered.

Kursk is an enigma, both the battle and the game. Historically it should never have happened, yet did; the game looks as if it should work, yet does not come off. It is not for me to recommend a cure, but it does seem such a shame that so much effort should be wasted for the amount of fine tuning required to achieve the designer's aims. *Kursk* held so much promise but was too far beyond the reach of the man who decided to grab the nettle. Perhaps history has been repeated after all. ■■

Kursk [continued from page 22]

are necessary since the attack sequence allows for many attacks, especially anti-tank fire. I don't consider this a major drawback as it will help average out the luck factor in a game, especially one with only 7 to 9 turns.

It would be worthwhile to mention two more points of possible confusion, although both are minor. First, the Indicator letter on the counters does not correspond to the Unit Manifest/Order of Battle. The letters used in the two systems refer to different subjects. Second, the term "Line of Communication" as employed in the game is different from the usual usage (did I mention something about a "Warning to Experienced Gamers"?) and, for once, actually means what it says: it refers to the approximate radio communication range between a unit and its commanding HQ. This is why the Line of Communication can cross an enemy unit or its ZOC; this is the first instance where I have seen a realistic definition of the term in a game.

Opinion Time

My opinion of *Kursk* is obvious: I think it is one of the best simulations of a massive land battle in WWII I've ever seen. It is a good, albeit somewhat long, game. I can find very little to complain about in the rules which, to my way of thinking, make or break

a game. They are clean and well organized. The rules in particular were carefully scrutinized for discrepancies and inconsistencies and very few were found. The only major complaint I have is the lack of a unit tabulation (as compared to the HQ listing given), which makes the set-up unnecessarily long (see addenda). For its size this game includes an amazing amount of information for so small a package. It will teach gamers something they may not have had to face before: the problems of controlling a front at the corps level and how to cope with real-time decision-making during the course of an attack. I will definitely recommend the game to serious gamers and especially to the gamers who want a simulation that is also a good game. I would not recommend it to those players who want an *Ogre* or *NAW* level game, unless you are interested in expanding your gaming ability. □□

Editor's Note: The *Kursk* addenda and optional rules were compiled by Eric Goldberg, who wishes to express his thanks to Neil K. Hall, Michael Flagiello, and Doug Hensley for their assistance in this task. ■■



Empires for Two [continued from page 9]

Empire better than the above procedure allows. In most cases, the Independent Empires will cycle through good times and bad, depending on the luck of the draw and geography (it's tough to be in the Western Mediterranean when the Saracens are active), but they will rarely expand much. Under the more flexible management that a player can provide, however, it is quite possible that these smaller Empires can bloom rather nicely. Of course, it is in your opponent's interest to see that your ventures with your allies fail, and fail miserably.

The procedure is by no means perfect, and may not even be complete (hence 33.21), but it is the best compromise between efficiency and simplicity that could be had.

It should be fairly obvious that gaining alliances is not easy. A lot of ties are required, since the Court Areas tend to be the more prosperous, heavily populated ones. It is for this reason that "C" results give the whole ball of wax. Also, note that when a non-player Empire draws a Leader Dies Heirless card, then anyone with *any* ties has a chance at getting an alliance. It thus may pay to establish at least one tie with each possible Court.

I'd like to thank Mr. Jamie Adams for his assistance with this project. ■■