

Wooden Tanks & Iron Markers; A Review of EastFront

by Alan Emrich

Wargaming the Russian Front during World War II is a lot like eating eggs. If you like them. That's great. Eggs can be fried, scrambled, poached, hard boiled, soft boiled, cooked into 1,000 other foods-you name it, and eggs can do it. At some point, however, a person will say, "Oh, no! Eggs again!" So it might be with yet another strategic level Russo-German WWII wargame. However, no matter how jaded a player's palate might be on the subject, an exquisitely prepared dish is always delicious, and *EastFront* from Columbia Games is that exquisitely prepared dish.

It's What Inside That Counts

It should be noted that *EastFront* does not possess a wargaming fast food "budget price." Instead, it is a full course, \$55.00 movable feast fit for a fighter. At Origins 1991, when this reviewer played his first few games with (*EastFront* designer) Craig Besinque and (SSG computer game designer) Ian Trout, Columbia Games was offering a money-back guarantee. Frankly, any purchaser who can find another player to participate in a game of *EastFront* will never want to return it. There is more great playing wargame depth and subtlety in that rattling box o' blocks than has been seen in this hobby in a long while.

EastFront comes with a full-size 22" x 34" map board, exquisitely printed on heavy cardstock which was cut and folded as a single piece. Thus, it is neither flimsy nor easy to jumble. The artwork is up to Columbia's standards for their beautiful Harn role-playing campaign maps and pretty enough to frame and hang up in a player's a "war room." One might even expect wargaming cartography greats like Roger B. MhcGowan or Steve Fuller to nod their assent when beholding *EastFront's* map. The map board uses "manly" sized 1.5" hexes and is covered with the rivers, forests, swamps and mountainous terrain that made up the Soviet Union of 1941.

The rattle in the box, however, is provided by the 120 hardwood counters (or "blocks") painted black for the Axis and red for the Soviets. Players familiar with other 'wooden block games' such as *Rommel in the Desert* or *Napoleon* will recognize these in an instant. Others must accept that these refugees from a Canadian paper mill provide solid, durable gamepieces which easily give players four-level step reduction through piece rotation and a delicious "fog of war" element with absolutely no fuss at all. If simplicity were truly beauty, the woodenblock system in wargames should win a pageant.

Overview of replay set up image

Players are also given a sheet of stickers which provide the "faces" of the counters once applied to the blocks. Again, as another tribute to functional simplicity and beauty, the numbers

and symbols are large, bold, and easily read. Two player aid cards are also provided with, virtually, everything a player needs to know presented in an abbreviated or tabular form and placed right at his fingertips. The utility and brevity of the information presented on these player aid cards is the clear result of what five years of play testing and development can do. That is what went into *EastFront*, and it shows. From the time one opens the box, the game has a well-play-tested "flannel shirt" comfortableness to it. Only players who have spent a long time with a game can boil its key elements down so usefully into such a functional game aid.

Finally, a 44-page rules book with large, readable type and plenty of graphics rounds out the *EastFront* package. Some people reading this article believe that wargame rules should be written for wargamers and forget "going over the basics" in a "real" wargame. They believe that is what introductory level wargames; are for. Others feel that every game should reach out to beginners, no matter how ponderous the rules might become. Fortunately, the rules to *EastFront* have found a heretofore undiscovered "middle ground." With the rules printed on the left 2/3 of the page (written clear enough for beginners, yet not condescending to grognards), and historical insights, design philosophies and game examples printed along the right 1/3 of the page, every rule is presented on one side and put into perspective on the other side. Essentially, the extra-informative right column of every page of rules is a combination designer's/developer's/player's notes feature with plenty of supplementary graphics and examples to clarify every important concept in the game. What a novel approach! Again, only a game that spends a long time in development gets such tender, loving care put into its rules book. Thank you, Columbia Games, for not rushing the production of *EastFront*.

Teaching Old Blocks New Tricks

For those who have a bit of familiarity with "wooden block wargaming," it has basically taken two previous steps during its evolution. The first was the introduction of Gamma Two's *Napoleon, Quebec 1759*, and *The War of 1812*. These games were introductory-to-low complexity level wargames, to which the wooden block element was their unique (although not quite redeeming in many wargamers, opinions) feature. Instantly, wooden blocks were perceived as not being part of "real" wargames, but instead were only "toys" used in those simple little games from Canada." Even Avalon Hill's purchase of the rights to produce *Napoleon* couldn't alter that image of "wooden blocks arc for kids."

Wooden blocks were later transplanted into a more meat and potatoes wargame, *Rommel in the Desert*. This wooden block game treated its subject with a real love for history and offered very serious new wargaming challenges. With its "wooden block stigma" [i.e., the constant association with traditional "family" games such as *Stratego* and *Risk!*], however, *Rommel in the Desert* had an uphill battle (or perhaps it was an "up escarpment battle). Players can still be heard making their little jests such as renaming Montgomery "Mahogany" or calling

Rommel “the Desert Oak.” To this day, however, this reviewer believes that *Rommel in the Desert* is the best North Africa wargame on its scale. It is extremely nerve-wracking to play, and made to order for the gamer/strategist inside every historical wargame enthusiast.

EastFront serves as ‘the next generation’ of wooden block games, using its predecessors’ successes and failures as constructive “building blocks.” No more point-to-point cavalry maneuvers (a la *Napoleon*) or small scale regiments in a swirling sea of nail-biting supply quandaries (as in *Rommel in the Desert*). Gaming the war in Russia is the “big leagues” of our hobby and the question was, “Will the little wooden blocks be lost among the Russian forests?” Craig Besinque and Tom Dalgliesh wouldn’t allow it, and completely revised the game several times during its long history of development. Where *EastFront* really triumphs, however, is in its simplicity. The same types of elements that have made the *Russian Campaign* a classic, create the same type of replay value in *EastFront*. In other words, *EastFront* is an elegant wargame for more “civilized” wargamers who appreciate less work and cumbersomeness.

Staying in Steppe

Specifically, the way *EastFront* handles maneuver across the vast game board is as elegant as a Mozart concerto. In most tradition hex-based wargames, units have a movement allowance and every movement phase—Bang!--away they go. In wooden block games, however, there is often an element of command control. So it is also in *EastFront*. Everything in the game hinges upon one’s precious Headquarters units (HQs). Their Order of Battle is pretty cut and dried. The Germans, for example, have their three Army Group HQs (North, Center and South), an Army Group “A” HQ (remember the Stalingrad campaign?) and their strategic OKH HQ. The Russians have one more HQ than the Germans, but they generally have a lower maximum Combat Value (CV). Most of the German HQs can be raised up to a maximum of 3 CVs, while most Russian HQs can only be raised to a 2.

The difference between a 2 CV and a 3 CV HQ in *EastFront* can be phenomenal. The current CV for an HQ (it is reduced by one each time it is used to command troops) is its “command radius.” In other words, a 3 CV HQ allows every unit within three hexes of itself the opportunity to move. Otherwise, there is no troop movement. Furthermore, it supplies all battles and launches air strikes within its command radius. By expending two CVs during a single turn, HQs will support “blitz” movement (a second movement phase for all units within the HQs command radius; reduced by one for the previous movement and combat phase) and supply “blitz” combat. This second movement and supplied second combat phase creates many exciting situations on the board, as experienced wargamers can imagine.

In fact, nothing can unbalance an opponent more effectively than an HQ which opts to reduce itself quickly (two steps per turn) in order to blitz. The blitzing player will either bleed the

defenders mightily (by way of two supplied combat phases) or achieve a breakthrough which can be exploited (via blitz movement). Blitzing, however, leaves that HQ weak for defense since its command ability is largely (if not entirely) “spent” by blitzing. Occasionally, a well-timed counterattack (or even a counter-blitz, such as the one performed by the Russians at Kursk) can decide a whole campaign against a “spent” enemy. Secret build-ups behind a wooden block curtain of maneuver, surprise attacks and counterattacks, grinding the enemy down, or blitzing through suspected or discovered weak points in the line are all important aspects of *EastFront*.

Resting the Troops

Thus, units have no initiative to move unless their local HQ is issuing orders that turn. Why not have them do so every turn? Because HQs, like every other unit in the game, can only be built up by one step per replacement/reinforcement phase (i.e., at the beginning of each month). There are two 1/2 month turns per month, meaning it takes a long time to build up an HQ with a current CV of “0,” particularly with all the temptation to use them to deal with immediate situations occurring on the board. With blitz moves requiring expenditure of a second HQ CV step during a single turn, the drain on command (and supplies, etc.) can be rapid, indeed.

As veteran wooden block players know, however, units do not maneuver within neat distances from HQs and can often become “stragglers.” The elegant solution presented in *EastFront* is the “Supreme HQs” of OKH and STAVKA. When expended for command purposes, these two HQs function differently from all the others. First of all, they can command twice their CV in units (.since each can be raised to a 3 CV, that means up to six units). Secondly, the units commanded can be located anywhere on the board. These units may conduct 1. strategic rail (or sea) movement” at the rate of 10 rail hexes (or 1 sea zone) per command spent to move it strategically. Finally, Supreme HQs cannot supply nearby battles, but have double range for conducting air strikes (the old “bomber reserves,” no doubt).

The practical upshot of these maneuver mechanics creates a very realistic feel to the war in Russia. Intensive blitzing or perhaps just constant steady pressure on a sector of the front, followed by “resting” periods while HQs and units replace much needed CVs is the norm for *EastFront* and quite in line with history. Getting something going on the board can usually be achieved, but sustaining a drive, however, is a wonderfully and realistically frustrating experience (particularly for the Russians with their lower CV HQs). A player may opt to concentrate HQs together in order to sustain a drive by expending them in turn, but his opponent will know that some sector of his line must not be within the command radius of any HQ therefore. That kind of knowledge can be either very useful or very dangerous. Such are the delicious predicaments a player faces due to the natural “fog of war” element inherent in wooden block gaming. Not knowing where, exactly, to exploit means that player-generals must develop a realistic “feel” for situational analysis based on

limited information. In simpler words, being able to “guess” an opponent’s intentions and deployment weaknesses, then exploit them fully, becomes the player’s challenge.

The basic player-turn sequence begins with HQ commitment (which will set the whole pace for the turn), including designating blitzing HQs with a coin (thus the term “& Iron Markers” from the article title). This is followed by movement, combat, blitz movement (if any), and a second combat phase (for all units blitzing and non-blitzing). Attacks launched within range of an active HQ are conducted normally, but beyond that range, the battles are “unsupported” and all defending units require an additional hit before they are reduced. Consequently, the second combat phase is almost exclusively used for either unsupported, overwhelming “mopping up” battles or for conducting supplied, blitz attacks.

Time & Weather display

Forward, Men!

Movement is standard stuff. Basically, mechanized units move three spaces and infantry units move two; one less each in the snow and only one space in the mud. Stacking is basically four units per hex less in the few swamp and mountain hexes that never see any action). There is a particularly interesting feature in the game for engaging units in battle. Only two units per clear terrain hexside (or one unit per any other type of hexside) can move into an enemy occupied hex. Thus, some battles will escalate (where the defender can only be reached through one hexside of bad terrain), while others will have instant, crashing intensity (where the defender is holding a salient). River crossings, in particular, can be tricky.

Weather comes in only three flavors: dry, mud, and snow, with four months requiring a die roll each game turn (as opposed to each month) for weather. Mud creates a terrible set of circumstances for both sides, with all HQs being “disrupted” (functioning at one less CV than their current level), every attack must be made without advantage and every defense reaps extra benefits. Furthermore, units slog along at the rate of one hex per turn (except cavalry, which moves two). Fortunately, these turns tend to whoosh by as both players will usually pass (or, at best, can only conduct very limited operations). Mud, particularly during the long spring rains, is a time for building up HQs and unit CVs in preparation for the Summer campaign ahead.

While snow freezes rivers and swamps, it also freezes the Germans in particular. While all units slow down a bit in the snow, German HQs are additionally disrupted, while the Russians aren’t. Furthermore, During the first two “Winters”(December-May), German HQ CV replacement costs are outrageous (double during the first Winter, and 150% during the second). Just to make a bad situation worse, during the first winter, German units may only move one hex and their armored attacks are made without advantage.

Most of Germany’s resources, therefore, go to shoring up their HQs to keep Russian advances in check during the Russian “winters of their discontent.” In real terms, this makes for some

very exciting attack/counterattack situations, and the continual stretching of both player’s resources that is very realistic. Seeing the Russians maneuver blithely in the snow and pay the Germans back gives everything the right historical “feel,” with the Russians enjoying a favorable attrition rate.

Rolling Through Combat

Combat in *EastFront* is occasionally frustrating, exhilarating, or brutal, but it is always exciting. Each unit has a CV ranging from 1-4 (only “good” units can be built up to a maximum of 4, meaning most of the Axis units and about 1/3 of the Russian units). This is not only the unit’s “step reduction” value (i.e., the number of “hits” it can take), but also its attack value (i.e., the number of dice it throws against enemy units).

As in other wooden block games, high dice (6’s) score hits. Armor and shock troops enjoy a combat advantage and get double fire (they hit on 5’s and 6’s), as do units defending in major cities, swamps and mountains. Russian units defending in the fortresses of Leningrad and Sevastopol get triple fire (4’s, 5’s and 6’s hit), as does the German siege gun unit when attacking these same fortresses. The Germans get two SS units in 1943, a mechanized infantry corps (which gets double fire like an armored unit), and an armored corps which gets triple fire.

Terrain also has its usual (and obvious) effects on Combat, as does the weather. One rule of importance concerns river crossings. When all the attackers are attempting to cross a defended river, in addition to whatever numbers the defender need to throw to hit the attacking units, a ‘1’ or a ‘2’ will repulse one back across the river. Thus, attackers can be thrown back without even a bridgehead to show for their losses, and leaving them in bad shape, indeed.

Units defending in favorable terrain or fighting against unsupported attackers can also absorb an extra “hit” before actually losing a step. For example, an attacker making an unsupported attack (i.e., the battle is not within range of an active HQ) against a defender in the woods would require three hits on the unit to reduce it a single step (one hit normally plus one for the woods plus one for the attacker being unsupported). It can be quite an exercise to dislodge even weakly held lines in good defensive terrain even with a concentrated, supported attack effort made against it.

A Place To Die

Losses are always applied evenly, beginning with a player’s strongest unit(s). Thus, a 4 CV armored unit is vulnerable if stacked with three 1 CV infantry units, for the armored unit must be reduced to a 1 CV unit before any of the infantry units can take the next step loss. When two or more units have the same strength, the owning player can choose his own losses. As a consequence of this rule, combined arms is the only way to go, so that “cheap” infantry steps can be lost while precious armor and mechanized forces are preserved.

Lost units are placed off the map in a “dead pile.” These cost extra production points to replace and return to the board as 1 CV units (“cadres”). There are two very compelling reasons to

keep one's dead pile empty, however. The first is that defense in depth is the best defense against a determined attacker. Even a 1 CV unit deployed in depth has considerable gravity in the combat equation. The second reason is that every unit in the dead pile equals negative Victory Points when the game ends. Rebuilding cadres is expensive, but so is losing the game.

Economic Geography 101

Economics are a crucial element to *EastFront*, and one which seems particularly well researched. Each major city or resource has a production value which is the same for both sides (except that the "resource starved" Axis economy gets double value for captured resources making the oil fields to the southeast; particularly tempting). This is added to each side's "basic production" points (which tend to rise for both players during the game, except during the latter parts of the war) to get a production point total.

Consequently, gaining and losing territory directly effects the player on a month-by-month basis as production points are recalculated and spent to replace attritioned units. Furthermore, one's production point value is also the primary source for the player's Victory Point total. From this value is added and subtracted several lesser numbers to determine the final Victory Point total. Thus, to gain significant territorial advantage on the board is to seek a favorable decision when it comes time to weigh the victory conditions.

Values range from ten for the city of Moscow and the oil fields of Baku (which, remember, is worth a tempting 20 to the Axis), to six for Leningrad and one or two for everything else on the board. Oddly, Sevastopol is worth no points. It does have important strategic significance. however, for two reasons: first, because it allows for sea movement and supply in the western Black Sea, and second because the Axis Satellite troops cannot move more than one hex from their home country until it is an Axis controlled city.

Scenarios To Go

There are eight full scenarios, plus an Operation "Edelweiss" introductory scenario included in *EastFront*. Each of the full scenarios covers a six-month campaign of the war. These scenarios are presented sequentially and can be linked together to form longer games and even the full war "Campaign Game." Of course, the rules book will have to be consulted for each scenario's special rules and their effect during the Campaign Game (such as the additional penalties to the Germans during the first winter, and when the siege guns become attached to the German 54th corps, etc.).

The modular design of the scenarios is a real boon. Each game played can be checked at the beginning of every June and December month to see how the players are doing vis-a-vis the victory conditions. If things are close, the game can (and should definitely) be continued. If one side has obtained a decisive victory, the game can be packed tip and a new one started: Mercifully, only a well-played campaign game will go on until

1945, so a player losing horribly can end the anguish and begin to fight another day that much sooner.

The victory conditions are very straight forward. One adds his production point level (which the enemy will know) plus two VPs for each friendly HQ CV on the board (which the enemy will not know). From this total is subtracted one VP per eliminated unit and two VPs for per eliminated HQ unit (double these for the Axis to two and four VPs, respectively). Next, one side or the other may have a handicap to subtract from their total to balance the scenario. The side with the higher total wins, and the greater the difference between the two players' scores, the greater the level of victory.

This victory point system makes for very rational last-turn play, rather than the usual "End Game Banzai Attacks" which are seen in most other wargames. Instead of players trying desperation attacks to secure an objective on the last turn, players must weigh benefits vs. risks in terms of VPs for expending commands and possibly losing units in battle. Will the player kill enough enemy units and/or take enough enemy VPs on the board to make operations viable in terms of VPs? Usually not, because at two VPs per HQ CV, these are usually the points that decide the winner.

Hex Control diagram

Side Orders of Chrome

After five years of play testing, some highly polished "chrome" will appear on any game. Seapower, for instance, is optional. It is handled in an abstract manner and can be easily remembered. Naturally, seapower has very little effect on the outcome of such a huge land war as the one being simulated. To go with the sea power rules is a special Soviet "Coastal Army" unit. Sea invasions may be conducted, but they are too risky to consider using regularly.

The Soviets also have a paratroop unit which may, optionally, make airdrops. This unit has its primary use in helping breach a weak river line (or support a seaborne invasion), but is expensive to build up, requires an entire HQ's attention to "drop" and is quite vulnerable to elimination. Again, it is another easily integrated element to add to the game, but will seldom have a decisive effect on the overall war effort.

What *EastFront* lacks is about 20 markers. Personally, this reviewer doesn't like using coins, and would rather have seen some 3/4 inch markers. This reviewer made his own set which consisted of. one marker for each HQ with its ID on it to designate their air strikes (11 total), four that read "blitz" on one side and "beachhead supply" on the other, four to indicate the I0 and 1s for each side's production level (and basic production level) and a turn marker with "I" and "II" on the front and back respectively to indicate if it is the first or second turn of the month.

Wooden Block "Splinter" Groups

It's time for "real" wargamers to take another look at wooden block games. *EastFront* is a deadly serious treatment of

the Russo-German campaigns of WWII, and presents many new approaches to gaming which greatly enhance both realism and playability. In fact, this wargamer had to "unlearn" many common cardboard tactics (i.e., those all too familiar, unrealistic gaming "tricks" used to optimize chances for winning a game, but that no general in his right mind would use to win a battle) and think more like actual military strategists. Once learned, the game mechanics quickly become second nature without any need to constantly reference the rules. Another big plus in *EastFront* is that when things slow down (like in the mud), the game speeds up (by players actually passing their turns), so that players are back into the action that much sooner.

With the price of board wargames going up on all fronts, computer games are looking more and more like a bargain. Don't be fooled by the \$55.00 price tag on *EastFront*. Any wargamer who doesn't wargame exclusively solitaire will be handsomely rewarded by adding *EastFront* to both their library (where most new purchases, sadly, end up all too soon) and, more appropriately, to their game table (where this reviewer's copy has been played so much the map is needed a little dusting around the edges). *EastFront* is a decisive victory as a strategic level wargame, and a delightful experience to play.

Go West, "Block Heads"

Columbia Games is expected to release the second game in the "Front" series, *WestFront*, by the summer of 1992 (presumably, another Origins release). This game will have a map which mates to *EastFront* and will begin with the Allies in control of North Africa and their invasions of Europe about to begin. While still under development, this game is scheduled to include options which will link it to *EastFront*, including a "Collapse of the Reich" two-front campaign game and a "Red Star/White Star" scenario. The hypothetical German invasion of Czechoslovakia is slated to be the introductory scenario (as "Edelweiss" was in *EastFront*).

From there, who knows? Some expansion modules perhaps? How about one to cover the overrunning of the West and Sea Lion? Another would be appealing which covers Spain and North Africa on the "Front" series scale. A third might include Turkey and the Middle East. When this all occurs, there will be a lot of smiling wargamers wanting to get their blocks off.