

After-Action Report: SPI's *Alma*

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Introduction

This is an after-action report of a solitaire play-through of the Alma scenario from SPI's *Crimean War* quad game, published in 1978. The author is an experienced wargamer and more familiar with the events of the Crimean War than most people, although by no means an expert.

History

The causes of the Crimean War are complicated and beyond the scope of this document. The war pitted the British, French, Turks, and (later) Sardinians against the Russians. The general war aim of the British and French was to prevent the Russians from gaining dominance over the Turks and access to the Mediterranean. Thus it was that an Anglo-French army landed at Eupatoria in the Fall of 1854, with the aim of taking the Russian naval base at Sebastopol. The Russians attempted to block this army at the Alma River, which the Allied army forced on September 20, 1854.

The battle was a set-piece river crossing. The steep slopes on the north (Russian) side of the river provided natural fortifications, and the Russians enhanced these by building a number of redoubts. They were hampered by the fact that their left (western) flank lay close to the sea, where the Allied fleet could support the army.

Although both sides had cavalry on the battlefield, the terrain was such that these forces did not take part. This was instead a battle that pitted British and French infantry against Russian infantry and artillery. The Allied side was credited with better-trained troops and superior weaponry (rifles), while the Russians were determined defenders supplemented by copious artillery and good terrain. The British and French suffered from poor coordination (a problem that plagued them throughout the war).

The British attacked into the teeth of the Russian position on the east side of the battlefield, but the French turning movement on the western flank was delayed. The battle was characterized by frenzied charges, counterattacks, and desperate stands. This was one of the first battles where the tactical advantages of the new infantry rifles became manifest, surprising both the defenders and the attackers. In the end, the Allied superiority in numbers and firepower carried the day, but the Russians retired towards Sebastopol without pursuit.

Rules Summary

The SPI quad games were planned as sets of quick-playing games with a common set of basic rules, modified somewhat for each quad set and then further by exclusive rules for each member of the quad. The Standard Rules for *Crimean War* differ considerably from the basic quad game lineage, with more emphasis on morale and the distinction between fire and melee combat. The units on both sides are infantry battalions and artillery batteries (there are no cavalry units).

Units are rated for fire combat, melee combat, morale, and movement¹ Most Russian infantry have a parenthesized fire strength, which means they can fire only in the defensive fire phase. Russian units usually have much higher melee and lower fire strengths than Allied. Most units have a morale rating of 4, but a few have a rating of 5 (notably the British 1st Division), and a few Russian units have lower ratings. Artillery batteries are given a type class from A to J; the fire strength at different ranges is provided by a table.

The units are backprinted, with the reverse side showing the unit as disrupted. Disrupted units have no zones of control, lower combat strengths and, sometimes, lower morale and movement allowances.

The sequence of play uses conventional player turns. After movement, there is combat, which consists of defensive fire, offensive fire, and melee. After combat there is a morale phase in which disrupted units attempt to rally. Infantry units may not stack with one another. Artillery may stack with one other unit (that is, another artillery or an infantry).

Fire combat is voluntary. Infantry may fire only at adjacent units, while artillery may fire at units as far as six hexes away (for some artillery classes). Artillery units that moved may not fire in the subsequent defensive and offensive fire phases. The result of fire combat is a number which is compared to the unit's morale rating. If the number is equal to the rating, the unit is disrupted; if higher, it disrupts and retreats. Units that are already disrupted must retreat in the first case and are eliminated in the second. Units with a morale rating of 5 (the highest) retreat one fewer hex than the result indicates (this applies to melee combat as well). Artillery units disrupt but do not retreat. Artillery units in enemy zones of control have the option of retreating instead of firing in the defensive fire phase.

All undisrupted infantry units in an enemy zone of control must attack in the melee phase, and all adjacent undisrupted enemy infantry units must be attacked. Disrupted units may attack at the player's discretion (and risk!). Terrain and morale effects are integrated into the CRT. In effect, higher-morale attackers get a positive die-roll modifier. Combat results specify retreats and disruptions, with already-disrupted units subject to elimination. Artillery units that are required to retreat are eliminated. Units may advance after melee combat.

After combat, there is rally phase where disrupted units roll against their morale ratings to see if they recover. There are DRMs for being adjacent to enemy (bad) and good-order friendly (good) units. Units that fail to rally just stay disrupted—they don't run away.

Beginning with turn five, the Russian player rolls a die for his preservation level, with a DRM for his infantry losses. When he hits preservation, he has to start exiting units (and may exit all of them if he likes).

The game is won on victory points, awarded for enemy infantry losses, early preservation triggering, and the Russian making his required withdrawals. The Allies have to have a pretty good lead in Victory Points to win a victory instead of a draw. Any Russian lead is a victory.

¹ In the Standard Rules, all units of a particular arm (artillery, infantry, cavalry) have the same movement allowance, which is not printed on the counters. However, in Alma this is not the case, and movement allowances are printed on the counters.

There are some minimal command control rules. There's a hefty DRM penalty if units from different divisions fire at the same hex. Allied units are restricted in how far south they can move until their entire division is across the river. Most of the French are restricted from moving at all until Game Turn 3.

Setup

The game uses fixed setup locations for all units. The orientation of the map has north on the left side. Allied units are set up on the north (left) side of the river with British (red) on the east (top) and French (blue) on the west (bottom). Russians (green) are on the south (right) side.²

Turn 1

A few British Light Division units start to cross the river: the 77th (East Middlesex) and 88th (Connaught Rangers). The rest of the division enters the vineyards in preparation to cross. Rifle Brigade, right at the bridge, stays put rather than cross without support. The 2nd Division marches west in order to avoid the (burning and impassible) Bourliuk town. 1st Division marches towards the gap between Light and 2nd, to make the frontal assault. 3rd Division is in reserve, behind 2nd. I chose to bring in the 4th Division reinforcements immediately. They are behind Light Division, with the idea of performing a flanking envelopment of the Russians.

The French are prohibited from moving until Turn 3.

Rifle Brigade regrets its decision to stand still, as it takes defensive fire from the Russian *CB* artillery batteries. They are lucky that no harm is done.

The Russian *2W Division*³, consisting of *Moscow* and *Brest-Bialystok* regiments begin moving to the heights east of Telegraph Hill to counter 2nd Division's movement. *Ugliz Regiment*⁴ occupies the Lesser Redoubt on the western flank. The *Minsk* and *Volhynia Regiments*⁵ start to move from their central position to cover the Russian's open left flank.

Rifle Brigade again is lucky enough to avoid damage from the Russian artillery.⁶

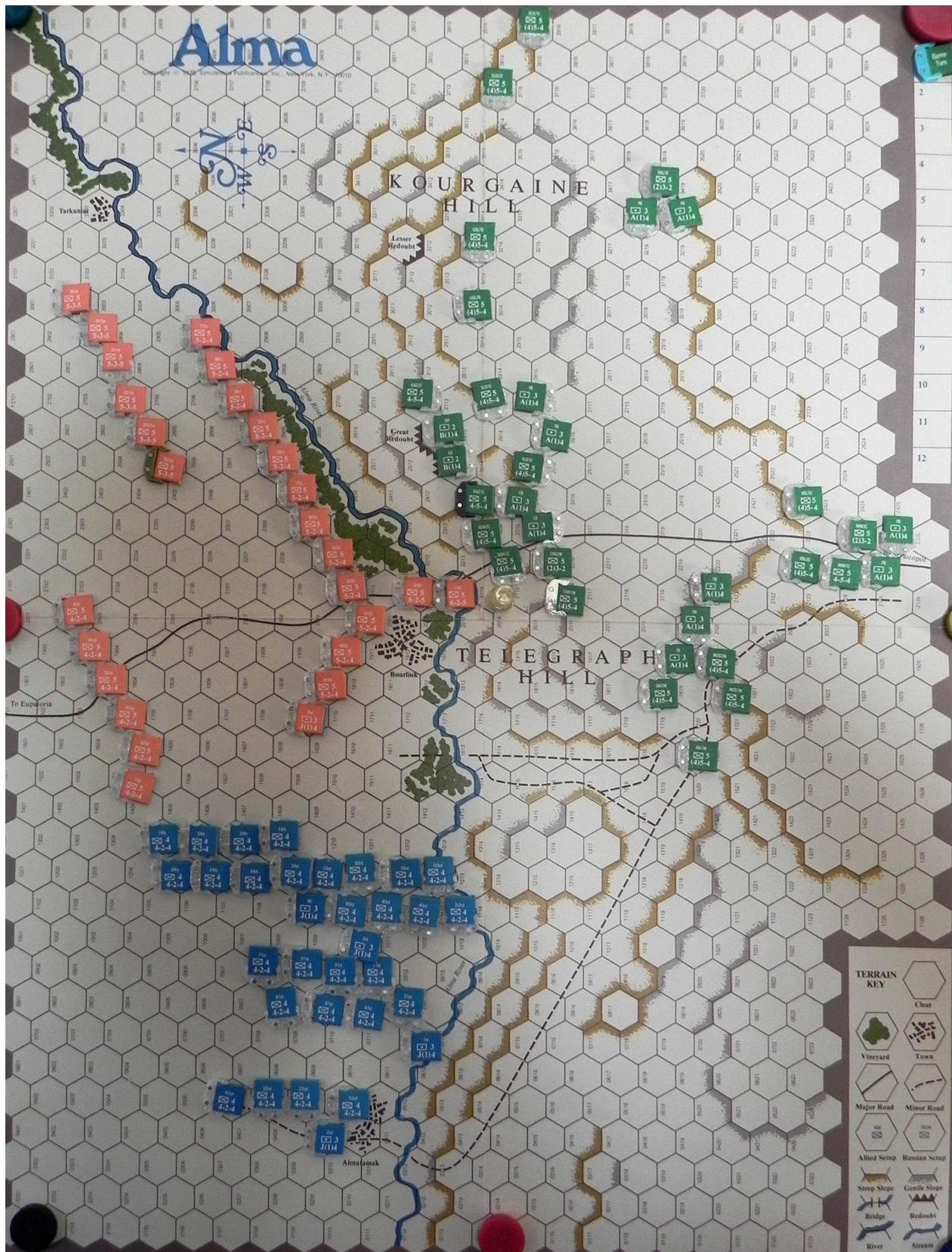
² This game was played on a vertical surface using magnets. You will see some magnets in the photos. They perform no game function.

³ I don't know what the Russian division designations are supposed to signify. It appears from Internet resources (<http://cwrs.russianwar.co.uk/cwrs-crimtexts-orbats.html>) that Brest-Bialystok was the *13 Infantry Division* and *Moscow* was part of the 17th.

⁴ The game marks the two battalions of this regiment as belonging to different divisions, *1E* and *2E*.

⁵ Again, these regiments are each shown as split between the *1C* and *2C* divisions.

⁶ The die roll was "6" both times!



Initial Setup

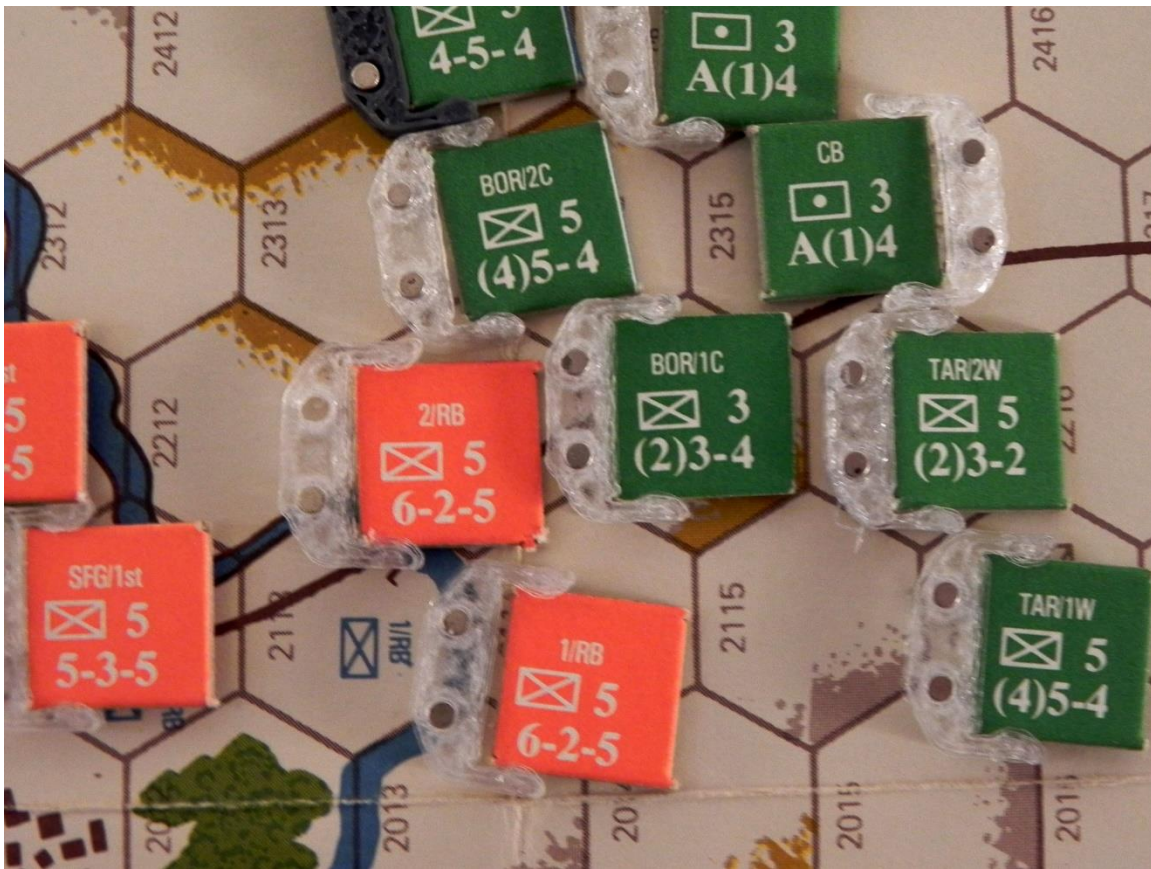


Turn 1

Turn 2

Light Division crosses the river and pauses to dress its lines. Rifle Brigade gets tired of being bombarded and crosses to take the fight to the *Borodino Regiment*. The Guards Brigade of 1st Division prepares to cross near the bridge, while the Highlanders form up just south of the vineyards. Most of 2nd Division crosses the river. 4th Division starts crossing behind Light Division. 3rd Division stands by behind 2nd.

In the exchange of fire between the Rifle Brigade and the entire Russian army, one *Borodino* battalion is disrupted.



Turn 2: Rifle Brigade wades in.

The Rifles follow up with cold steel, disrupting the other battalion and forcing both to retreat upon their supporting artillery.

Taroutine prepares to counterattack 2/Rifle Brigade while *Kazan* and the disrupted *Borodino* do the same for 1/Rifle Brigade. *Moscow* and *Brest-Bialystok* take up positions. *Minsk* and *Volhynia* continue marching down the track.

Rifle Brigade fires defensively at the units to their front, without effect.

The Rifles get the full benefit of all the Russian artillery that can be brought to bear. However, their superior morale carries them through.

In the melee phase, 1/RB is disrupted and forced to retreat, while 2/RB falls back in good order. *Kazan* and *Taroutine* advance.

Both *Borodino* battalions rally.

Turn 3

Light Division advances in line, coming into contact with *Uglitz* and the Great Redoubt. 4th Division crosses the river and marches behind them. The Guards cross the river and relieve the Rifles, which split apart to let them pass through. The Highlanders are still pushing through the vineyards to the river. 2nd Division comes into contact with *Moscow*. 3rd Division follows 2nd but does not start to cross.

The French are on the move. Most of 3rd Division crosses the river, coming into contact with *Brest-Bialystok*. 1st and 2nd Divisions are hampered by terrain and are in the middle of crossing. 4th Division stays in reserve on the south bank.

Defensive fire disrupts the French 3/3rd, the 95th/2nd (Derbyshire), and the 23rd/Light (Royal Welch Fusiliers). Offensive fire has no effect.

In the melee phase:

- 49th /2nd (Princes Charlotte of Wales's) forces *Brest-Bialystok* (*BB/1W*) to retreat.
- 47/2nd (Lancashire) and 41/2nd (Welch) push back *Moscow* (*Mos/1W*)
- 30/2nd (Cambridgeshire) and 55/2nd (Westmorland) do the same to the other *Moscow* battalion (*Mos/2W*), disrupting it as well.
- The Scots and Coldstream Guards disrupt and push back a *Taroutine* battalion (*Tar/1W*), forcing the displacement of its counterpart *Tar/2W*.
- Light Division's 33rd (Duke of Wellington's) and 7th (Royal Fusiliers) clear the Great Redoubt of its artillery batteries.

The Russians move *Volhynia Regiment* down the track to try to block the mass of French blue. *Brest-Bialystok* mounts a counterattack against 49/2nd. The Russians try to drag around their reserve artillery to positions where they will do some good behind Telegraph Hill. On the hill itself, *Minsk* and *Moscow* prepare to attack 47/2nd. Further to the east, a mixture of regiments tries to push back the Guards and Light Division advance. On the far right of the Russian line, *Uglitz* goes after 77th/Lt, while the artillery and *Sousdal* move up in support.

In the defensive fire phase, 49th/2nd disrupts one of *Brest-Bialystok*'s battalions. 30th/2nd forces an already-disrupted *Moscow* battalion to retreat. The Guards disrupt the Russian counterattack by disrupting *Kazan* and forcing *Borodino* to retreat.

47th/2nd is disrupted by offensive fire. The Guards endure artillery and musket fire without flinching.

- 49th/2nd is forced to retreat, displacing the French 3/3rd in the process.
- 49th/2nd is eliminated by the *Moscow* and *Minsk* assault.

- Surprisingly, the low-morale *Taroutine* battalion forces the Scots Guards to retreat.
- *Kazan*'s attack on the Coldstream Guards goes badly wrong, and the Russians have to retreat.
- *Vladimir Musketeers* meet the same fate attacking the Royal Fusiliers.
- *Uglitz* pushes 77th/Lt out of the Lesser Redoubt, disrupting them into the bargain.

In the rally phase, all Russian units except for *Borodino* return to good order.



Turn 3: British engaged along the line, French make contact.

Turn 4

The French 3rd Division prepares to attack *Brest-Bialystok* while 1st and 2nd start to make a wide movement around the Russian right flank. 4th Division moves up to the river.

British 2nd Division is being shoved by the French on their right, and so they shift their efforts to Telegraph Hill. 1st Division's Guards are still locked in their effort to clear the main road, while the Highlanders are struggling across the river behind them. Light Division begins moving through a gap between the redoubts, threatening to engulf the Russian center. This leaves 4th Division to deal with the Lesser Redoubt. 3rd Division is finally across the river, behind 2nd Division.

Defensive fire disrupts the French 3/3rd and British 30th/2nd (Cambridgeshire), forcing both to retreat. 95th/2nd (Derbyshire) is disrupted but holds its ground. Rather than face the Coldstream Guards unsupported, the Russian artillery retreats onto the infantry behind them. The Light Division's 19th (Green Howards) and 88th (Connaught Rangers) are both disrupted by musket and artillery fire. The Royal North British Fusiliers (21st/4th) are disrupted and driven back from the Lesser Redoubt.

The French disrupt one of the *Brest-Bialystok* battalions, forcing it to retreat two hexes. British 2nd Division fire disrupts *Moscow*. *Taroutine* takes fire from several directions and, unable to retreat, is eliminated. Light Division's fire disrupts *Vladimir Musketeers*. 4th Division disrupts one of the *Uglitz* battalions.

- French 4/3rd pushes back a *Volhynia* battalion.
- After the retreat of 3/3rd, 5/3rd is unable to overcome a *Brest-Bialystok* battalion on its own and instead must retreat.
- Despite being disrupted, *Moscow* repels the Welshmen of 49th/2nd and 41st/2nd, forcing them to retreat.
- 55th/2nd (Westmorland) has no better luck against *Minsk*.
- Light Division forces *Vladimir Musketeers* to retreat.
- An attack by Light Division's disrupted battalions is surprisingly successful, eliminating a Russian artillery battalion and a *Vladimir* battalion for lack of retreat route
- 20th/4th (East Devonshire) and 57th/4th (West Middlesex) force an *Uglitz* battalion to retreat from the Lesser Redoubt.
- 45th/4th (Nottinghamshire) is forced to retreat from its side of the Lesser Redoubt.

All Allied units rally, except for 95th/2nd and 19th/Lt.

With big gaps opening everywhere, the Russians decide to collapse the bag, pulling back to the next line of hills before they are engulfed. The reserve artillery batteries provide some cover as the advanced units seek an orderly retreat.

There is no combat.



Turn 4

Turn 5

The Allied forces pursue the Russians. Hampered by terrain, British 4th Division fails to maintain contact, but most of the other divisions across the front keep up the pressure. French 1st Division is working its way behind the Russian left flank, with 2nd Division behind them. British 3rd Division moves to the left towards the road. French 4th Division begins crossing the river.

French 3/3rd is disrupted by artillery fire. British 1/3rd (1st Royal Regiment) and 30/2nd (Cambridgeshire) are disrupted and retreats two hexes.

Allied offensive fire is less effective than expected. The French accomplish nothing, nor does the British 2nd Division. The Guards disrupt an artillery unit and also disrupt and force the retreat of the *Taroutine* battalion stacked with it. Light Division has more luck, disrupting and retreating *Kazan* and *Vladimir Musketeers* while disrupting an artillery battery and an *Uglitz* battalion.

The French 3rd Division's assaults are mostly unsuccessful. They force one *Volhynia* battalion to retreat, but they are repulsed in three other assaults. Worse still, the already-disrupted 3/3rd is eliminated.

British 2nd Division's 41st (Welch) are also repulsed by *Moscow* and artillery. The Guards easily overrun the artillery battalion abandoned by *Taroutine*. Light Division's 33rd (Duke of Wellington's) does the same for the artillery that *Kazan* retreated from, but its comrades of the 23th and 88th (Royal Welch Fusiliers and Connaught Rangers) are repulsed by the disrupted *Sousdal*. East Middlesex is disrupted and retreated in its assault on *Uglitz*.

In the morale phase all except the 1st Royal Regiment (1/3rd) rally.

The Russians must now check their preservation level. However, given that they have lost only three infantry units at this point, no die roll would get the total up to the 10 necessary to trigger their retreat.

The Russians continue to withdraw to the next line of heights in relatively good order. They have some difficult decisions about whether to move their artillery or let them stand and fight. Several batteries are left in place, with the hope that they can withdraw before combat in the Allied player turn.

Because of the Russian withdrawal, the Allies have few targets for defensive fire. They have no effect.

Russian offensive fire consists of artillery only, with no results.

There is no melee combat.

All Russian units rally, except for *Taroutine*.



Turn 5. The blank counters are to help me remember which artillery units moved this turn.

Turn 6

The Allies pursue the Russians all along the line. Congestion is becoming a problem, as the divisions squeeze against each other. The Rifle Brigade comes into the line between 2nd and 1st Divisions. The Highland Brigade finally catches up with the Guards. Light Division and 4th

Division form a solid line on the Allied left. British 3rd and French 4th stay in reserve, as there is nowhere for them to deploy.

In the defensive fire phase, *Volhynia* disrupts French 4/1st, forcing it to retreat. *Brest-Bialystok* does the same to 5/3rd, covering the withdrawal of their artillery battery. *Moscow* fails to budge 55th/2nd (Westmorland), but their artillery also withdraws. Another battery pulls out, to join with *Minsk*. The artillery facing Rifle Brigade are cut off from retreat and so stand to their guns. They succeed in disrupting 2/RB. Another battery is trapped by British 1st Division and disrupts 79th/1st (Cameron Highlanders), while supporting fire from another disrupts 42nd/1st (Black Watch). *Uglitz* disrupts 77th/Lt (East Middlesex). 4th Division sees its 20th (East Devonshire) and 45th (West Middlesex) disrupted by defenders on the Russian right flank.

The French have no luck with offensive fire. British 2nd Division disrupts *Moscow*, and the Rifle Brigade disrupts that trapped artillery battery. 1st Division disrupts the other artillery battery and eliminates a disrupted *Kazan* battalion. Light Division eliminates a disrupted *Sousdal* battalion. 4th Division disrupts and forces the retreat of an *Uglitz* battalion.

French 1st Division has mixed success in the melee phase, driving back one Russian battalion in one attack but being forced to retreat in another. The disrupted *Moscow* battalion repels an attack by British 2nd Division. However, that division does overrun an isolated artillery battery. The Scots Guards and Rifle Brigade push back a disrupted *Taroutine* battalion, but the Grenadier Guards are repelled by *Borodino*. The Coldstream Guards overrun an artillery battery. Three battalions of the Light Division are insufficient to dislodge the *Vladimir Musketeers*.

In the morale phase, all Allied units rally, except for the French 5/3rd and the British 45th/4th (Nottinghamshire).

The Russians again pass their preservation die roll.

The Russian left is holding pretty well, but their right is held very weakly, and the British 1st Division is threatening to punch through on the center right. They pull in their units from the right flank in order to put something in front of the Guardsmen and Highlanders.

Defensive fire by the Scots Guards eliminates the disrupted *Taroutine*. Elsewhere, defensive fire has no effect.

Russian artillery disrupts the Coldstream Guards and the 95th/2nd (Derbyshire).

Volhynia forces French 21/1st to retreat. All three Highland battalions hold their ground in the face of assaults by *Borodino*, *Minsk*, and *Uglitz*.

Moscow rallies, but the disrupted *Uglitz* and *Minsk* battalions do not.



Turn 6

Turn 7

French 1st Division avoids the strong position of *Volhynia* on the heights, forming up into a snaking column to try infiltrating around it. This leaves 2nd Division in the awkward position of having to attack the position head-on, across 1st Division's column. 3rd Division is squeezed between French and British 2nd Divisions but lines up an attack on *Brest-Bialystok* and its supporting artillery.

British 2nd Division is also hampered by lack of maneuver room. Its lead units go after two artillery-supported stacks on the slopes. Rifle Brigade attacks *Moscow*. The Guards and Highlanders of 1st Division continue to pound at the Russian center. Light Division takes advantage of one *Uglitz* battalion's lack of ZoC (disruption) to infiltrate around it. 4th Division starts to fold around the Russian right flank, hampered by the steep slope.

British 3rd and French 4th Divisions continue to shuffle along in reserve, as there is simply no room for them to deploy.

French 3rd Division's attacks are totally frustrated when both battalions are disrupted and forced to retreat by musket and artillery fire. Russian defensive fire has no effect elsewhere.

French 2nd Division disrupts and retreats one *Volhynia* battalion. Rifle Brigade disrupts *Moscow*. Grenadier and Scots Guards disrupt at *Borodino* battalion and force it to retreat. Light Division disrupts and retreats the good-order *Uglitz* battalion while eliminating the disrupted one.

In the melee phase, French 2nd Division dislodges the remaining *Volhynia* battalion and gains the heights. British 2nd Division has mixed success: Only one of three assaults succeeds, retreating *Minsk* and overrunning an artillery battery. However, one of the failed attacks disrupts the 55th (Westmorland). *Minsk* repels an attack by Coldstream Guards and Black Watch. The Sutherland Highlanders force back *Vladimir Musketeers*. 4th Division's 20th (East Devonshire) and 57th (West Middlesex) force back a *Sousdal* battalion, overrunning an artillery battery.

In the morale phase, all Allied units except for French 4/3rd and British 55th/2nd (Westmorland) rally.

The Russians reach their preservation level.

The Russians withdraw an artillery battery and the disrupted *Uglitz* battalion to satisfy their requirement. *Sousdal* falls back on the center to provide right flank security. On the left flank, *Volhynia* does much the same. In between, the Russians try to hold a rather shaky line.

The French have no units that can participate in defensive fire. British 30th/2nd (Cambridgeshire) disrupts a *Moscow* battalion and the artillery battery supporting it. Rifle Brigade eliminates the other, disrupted *Moscow* battalion. The Scots Guards eliminate a disrupted *Borodino* battalion, opening up a huge hole in the Russian center. The Sutherland Highlanders disrupt *Minsk*.

The Russians have little scope for offensive fire, and none of it is effective.



Turn 7

The melee phase sees a few forced attacks. A *Minsk* battalion, aided by the disrupted *Moscow*, pushes the 30th/2nd (Cambridgeshire) back off the heights. *Vladimir Musketeers* and a disrupted *Minsk* battalion fail to dislodge the Sutherland Highlanders.

Turn 8

French 1st Division moves to envelope *Volhynia*. 2nd Division regroups behind 1st. 3rd Division renews its attack on one battalion of *Brest-Bialystok* while British 3rd Division takes on the other. Rifle Brigade rushes through the gap in the Russian line and takes the *Brest-Bialystok* positions from the rear. The Guards Brigade performs the same maneuver to the east of the road, leaving the Highland Brigade to attack the front of the same positions. Light Division swarms around *Sousdal*, leaving 4th Division behind them. 3rd Division advances through the gap between the Rifles and the Guards. French 4th Division holds its position.

Defensive fire disrupts French 2/1st and forces the retreat of 1st Zouaves of 3rd Division. On the other end of the battlefield, *Sousdal* disrupts 33rd/Lt (Duke of Wellington's).

The French disrupts a *Volhynia* battalion. British 2nd Division does the same to *Brest-Bialystok*, and Rifle Brigade to *Moscow*. For the first time in the battle, Allied artillery comes into play, helping to destroy a *Minsk* battalion that is unable to retreat. The Guards and Highlanders cooperate to eliminate *Minsk* and the *Vladimir Musketeers* plus disrupt a *Borodino* battalion and artillery battery. Light Division eliminates a *Sousdal* battalion.

French 1st Division's attack on *Volhynia* goes badly. The French retreat, with some disruptions. 3rd Division forces a *Brest-Bialystok* battalion to retreat, overrunning another artillery battery.

British 2nd Division's 49th (Princess Charlotte of Wales') eliminates the other *Brest-Bialystok* battalion when it can't retreat. Rifle Brigade eliminates *Moscow* and an artillery battery. 1st Division eliminates *Borodino* and an artillery battery. Light division disrupts *Sousdal* and forces it to retreat.

In the morale phase, all Allied units rally, except for the two battalions of French 3rd Division.

At this point, only four Russian infantry battalions, and no artillery, remain on the map. They take to their heels, ending the game.



The end.

Victory Conditions

Allied victory points (12):

- 16 Russian infantry units eliminated (16 points)
- Russian preservation triggered before turn seven (0 points)
- 2 Turns when at least two Russian units exit because of preservation (-4 points)

Russian victory points (8):

- 2 Allied infantry units eliminated before preservation is triggered (2 points)
- 6 complete turns before preservation is triggered (6 points)

Victory point difference: $12 - 8 = 4$. This is an Allied victory. However, the result is pretty close. The Allies needed a difference of at least 3 to win.

Comments

The Russians hold good defensive terrain, but they are outnumbered have little in the way of reserves. Their left flank is lightly held and prone to collapse as soon as the French can come to grips with it.

The Allies have plenty of troops. If anything, they have too many, as the movement phase turns into an exercise in traffic management. Some Allied divisions never got into combat, as they were always following behind the front. The French were hampered in their attempt to turn the Russian flank by the edge of the map.

Neither side's troops have a notable qualitative advantage. The Allied unit have higher fire ratings but lower melee ratings. However, you have to get pretty high fire concentrations to be confident of getting a result. Also, Russian artillery goes a good way to redress the infantry imbalance. Melee combat is dominated by the morale rating rather than the combat strength, and neither side has a general advantage there (the Guards and Highlanders being an exception).

The terrain doesn't help as much as you might think. Its biggest help is in slowing down the approach of the Allied troops and preventing them from shifting laterally once engaged. However, the high morale ratings of the troops in this game means that they have a decent prospect of a good melee combat outcome, even at the lowest CRT column (which they often use).

Although there is little stacking, counter density gets pretty high near the front line, with a band of hexes where a unit is in every one. I played this game using magnetic counter clips, which increase each unit's footprint. That made for a tight squeeze and difficulty picking up individual counters.

There aren't big strategic choices in this game. On the Allied side, it is a matter of crossing the river and banging into the enemy. The flanking movement is obvious. For the Russians, it is a matter of holding on, falling back when necessary, and shuffling troops around to keep gaps from opening up. There are a lot of small decisions to be made in setting up the next turn's combat, but there aren't operational decisions to make.