

## Bullets, gas, and beans ... or schnitzel ... or borscht?

### A Review of Phalanx Games' 1941: Race to Moscow

- Game Designer: **Waldek Gumienny**
- Article by: **Lou Coatney**

About 35 years ago now, wargame player and publisher **Darwin P. Bromley** and I were collecting every Barbarossa - Russian Front 1941 - game there was. We even had copies of Maine resident Robert (Alesia) Bradley's early xeroxed division scale Fall Barbarossa, and Robert also sent me his smaller scale never-sold/-published Korps Barbarossa which I shared with Darwin. (I lost them moving to Norway, and Darwin passed away last year, sadly. I hope someone still has those games to send to a repository.)

I have lost count of how many Barbarossa games there are now, and I have certainly added to the number - and not just with my own now-classic **Sturm nach Osten** first published in Wargamer 19 and German Eagle vs. Russian Bear. However, there are (other) must-have Barbarossa games at corps-army scale: all-time classic Avalon Hill Stalingrad of course, Australian John Edwards' Russian Campaign, SPI's (original) Barbarossa, GDW's/John Astell's unique monster-unit 1941: Operation Barbarossa, Russian Front, my Dark Crusade now eclipsed by Darkest Crusade, Carl Paradis's No Retreat!, Ty Bomba's overlooked Blitzkrieg!, others, and, I would modestly say, my most recent Robot Barbarossa.

A year or so ago, I finally got a copy of the novel **Phalanx Games** cross between a resources-allocation Euro game and wargame, **1944: Race to the Rhine**. I took it to Ares Oslo, and we puzzled over it and played with it, and I even created some alternative, revision units and a chronological turn track up on BoardGameGeek. (Out of the box, the game ends itself like many Euro games do, if the Allies haven't crossed the Rhine and have run out of options.)

That sleeps in its box now, and when I heard Phalanx was working on 1941: Race to Moscow, I said to myself, "NO WAY! You guys aren't getting me this time!" And then, I realized, it will be unique ... and a MUST-HAVE for any Barbarossa game player/collector, and that means me, with my retirement income now stabilized, if still minimal. And so I've pre-paid for a copy - at latest word to come out in October now. In the meantime, I hectored Jaro ("Andrus") Andruszkiewicz/Phalanx for a downloadable digital draft, and he/they instead sent me a FREE playtest copy of **Race to Moscow**, if I would publicly review it.

And what a playtest copy! A very professional mapboard in classic 22"x33" size, superb historically illustrated playing cards, and exquisite playing pieces. No wooden abstractions here. The ammo boxes, fuel drum clusters, and feedsack piles must have been 3D printed. (I've asked if I can get a retro set for my Race to the Rhine.) The German infantry armies actually have tiny soldiers standing on geometric shape bases, and the 4 little panzer group tanks are a wonder unto themselves.

I had seen a photo of the tank piece for 3rd PanzerGroup (hereafter 3.PzGp) and the larger one for Guderian's larger 2.PzGp and I logically figured they were just small and large German early war PzIII medium tanks. Well, the first panzer I pulled from its Army Group North bag, dark gray 4.PzGp, looked even smaller, and I realized to my astonishment it was a PzII light tank, not a III! Looking closer at the smaller light gray Army Group Center panzer, it is a Czech Pz38! And then - sure enough - South's 1.PzGp is a IV! And the Luftwaffe Ju88, Ju87 Stuka, and He111, as well as the Baltic Kriegsmarine naval support S-boat, are similarly beautifully rendered.

And the little European train engines are as well done, especially when sitting on their rail yard and in their round house in the lower right hand corner of the mapboard.

And the wintry train scene cover art reminds me of Walt Disney's Polar Express! (Although winter/snow isn't yet in the game, R2M veteran Wojciech Siero<sup>324</sup>; (hereafter, WRS :) ) has told me Waldemar may put in a 1 ammo per attack penalty for that, but the jury is still out. Enough German weapons froze to justify it.)

And so I cleared off my kitchen table for the first time in 3(?) months and set up the game. A single player is supposed to take just one of the army groups, but I wanted to play all 3, so it took me a while longer than it otherwise should have. And I thought of my little plastic sushi cups in my plastic trash to put the ammo, fuel, and feedbag pieces in.

All set to go with the photocopied draft rules, and I plunged right in - with coaching on BoardGameGeek from WRS - quickly realizing that the preferred operational objective is pocketing the Soviet forces rather than battling with them - some of the 22Jun41 mechanized corps being powerful and dangerous ... if operationally slow ... costing 3 ammo plus a fuel to battle ... as they historically were.

Trains are more efficient delivering supply forward, of course - 6 units vs. trucks' 4 - but the railroad lines' rail gauge must be converted before they can be used, and the positions at both ends must be so for a train to run between them. The initial train pool from which players draw is 17 trains. Players can draw on 5 color-coded trucks each, as well.

As in Race to the Rhine, once trains and/or trucks are placed - a maximum of 3 per turn before the first Reorganization and then 4 per turn thereafter - and supplies delivered down them, they can't be used again, although a train can be later used down a same route a truck was and vice versa. And after all the trains are used comes Reorganization, where they are all taken from the board to be re-positioned again.

(For me, "Reorganization" is an inherently traumatic term, let alone traumatic in this game. When a plebe my one semester at West Point I was the guide-on for my company in the Reorganization Parade, which I did perfectly getting us into perfect position ... and then realized I had forgotten the automatic 6-count-halt to bring my rifle down ... and my competition-destroying mistake could be and was seen by everyone on The Plain parade ground.)

As was the case for RttR, I do not understand the rationale for this system, and I would like to know it. When rail lines were established historically, they stayed so, even if disrupted by aerial and/or partisan attacks - and the latter are indeed in the army group events card sets. I have, of course, tried a revision, wherein the rail routes remain un-reorganized, but how then do you keep track of when a specific rail (or truck) link's capacity has been reached? R2M's one-delivery-only mechanic may be intended as a solution.

My campaigns wore on, and supply limitations slowed down my forces, enabling more Soviet unit markers to appear and complicate and ultimately prevent me making the minimum-loss pockets. Army Group North/Nord got closest to its objective Leningrad, but then the Soviet player - whomever he was - had enough unit markers there to critically slow him while the German units weakened elsewhere, and the Soviet markers eventually would run out and the game be over in the 10th turn.

And there are free/additional Actions you can make, like using Airpower or a drawn Recon or Axis Auxiliaries "pursuit" card or asking OKH's assistance which can result in: "Move one unit." and getting "Brandenburgers."

With experience, I might be able to get farther or even take a Victory city - unless the competitive army group commanders could block my way while me not blocking them in retaliation ... er, turn. If no army group commander player can take his victory objective - Moscow for Mitte/Center although the other players can (instead) go after it from the flanks and Rostov for South - then the ("certificate of participation," I prefer to say) "winner" is the player with the most medals for objective cities and enemy unit( value)s taken, as in Race to the Rhine.

And by seizing army group border objective cities and also forcing other commanders into unfavorable moments of Reorganization, players can elbow each other out ... ultimately to the Soviet side's advantage. (There can be a fourth, Soviet player, and he can greatly affect play by where he allocates Soviet unit markers, but they are still strictly defensive pieces.)

I do - typically - have many questions for this indispensable Barbarossa game. First off, from personal Army experience I know that supply officers - or sergeants, anyway - can be very competitive and/or even corrupt in achieving their missions, for themselves as well as their units. (Don Rickles' Crapgame in Kelly's Heroes was an angel by comparison. :-) ) However, I don't think the German army group command supply officers waged such internecine competition for assets ... although if I am wrong I would like to see the reason why cited. For sure, 2.PzGp commander Guderian wanted special logistical treatment.

And if no one can achieve their historical objective - no one did, albeit Leningrad was isolated and starved - should anyone "win?" Could there be alternative victory conditions to make this a cooperative team game instead? (On the other hand, after the campaign and indeed war was over, the German generals were comparing their performances and often blaming their failures on other generals, so ....)

I do have questions about the point-to-point map. Building a rail-bed is a major surveying and construction effort - not mere conversion, even if places in the railbed (and bridges) have been blown up. For example, there was no railroad at all leading northeast out of Kaunus to "Panevezys," and a rail link between the two should not be possible, even though it is the most obviously direct route on the mapboard - less so on the actual OKH map I had posted in Leavenworth's Combined Arms Research Library's digital library. Major rail routes were not so common at this 10 positions Warsaw to Moscow - 72 miles per hex - game scale that they needn't be specified.

But the connections are fascinating in themselves in gameplay, and with play the reasons some exist and others don't may become apparent.

There are absences of links which seem odd. The gaps for the Pripet Marsh are certainly justified and excellent, but why no connection between Poltava and Kremenchug or Uman and Kotovsk or ...? (I do coincidentally happen to be working up a 10-hexagon map. :-) ) Some of the routes/links are historically questionable. NovogrodSeverskiy-Orel-Tula-Serpuchov-Moscow is reserved to AG South, although that was the one attempted by Guderian's 2.PzGp. There are routes which can be taken by either neighboring army group, and this is one of them - same for Rzhev-Kalinin-Moscow to Moscow's north.

As to the German unit capabilities, I do not understand why both Mitte/Center panzer groups can't be activated as just one Action. And given their greater consumption of fuel and expense of operation in that regard, I've suggested a little extra of that for Mitte/Center's supply. In my game, 2.PzGp was left behind in Mitte/Center's dust.

Waldemar's rating of Russian unit cards seems perfect to me with only one exception: 3.MexKor should be an ammo cost to the Germans of 3 not just 2. It was its immobilized KV-2 tank that held up North's/Nord's spearhead for a whole day, and it was one of the mexkors that had more tanks like that one.

The early (green) and late (blue) coding of the more powerful Soviet unit markers' cards is well made, especially with 1., 3., and 4. Shock Armies able to come into play then. (Again, good research by Waldemar: 2.SA, under A.A. Vlasov, was deployed in 1942, not in 1941.)

The army group event cards are intriguing. In meaningful contrast to Race to the Rhine, the Germans are "requisitioning" food from the invaded people, not giving food to starving liberated people. The one-per-army-group partisan cards can interrupt rail traffic at a critical juncture. And even the weak 1-ammo-cost Soviet armies can disrupt casualty-and-advance expectations.

However, as in RttR, there are filler factoid no-effect cards - like Ark Royal's sinking in the Mediterranean in South's cards - which might be replaced.

The Germans captured and put to good use the simple, reliable, and rugged Soviet Zis trucks. They even managed to seize some rail stock which avoided the need for rail conversion. In the latter case that could happen when the Germans made a sudden, unexpectedly long-distance lunge. (For example, Russian civilians in Orel at first thought the tanks entering their town and among their running trams were Russian.)

I love the rule about the (mostly horse-drawn) German field armies being able to move 2 links, if they don't encounter an enemy unit or other stopping card in the first position, but at the cost of a feedbag. :-) And, again, the infantry/field armies certainly do move less expensively otherwise than the panzer groups, and all of them can be moved by only one Action.

Army group cards might include 1-ammo Russian armies that - especially in the open South - and be "overrun" without ammo cost by panzer groups. There could be cavalry cards that would stop field armies at the first position while not stopping panzer groups at all. And German air support might have the option of cancelling either the fuel cost of fighting Soviet mekors or the given ammo.

Another possibility is giving pocketed Soviet units a breakout chance, albeit with penalized ammo power and no fuel cost to the attacked German unit. In fact, allowing Soviet unit markers 1-position moves to improve their positions might be considered.

As to the outcome of my game, South had by far the most medals and - thanks to its opening, guaranteed pocket - the most unit credit and so got the top Certificate of Participation. :-/ Nord got the farthest geographically and came in second with medals and Soviet units taken. I think I mishandled Mitte/Center - I should have kept the panzer groups on the flanks to make pockets - but again the only-1-panzergroup-per-Action rule seems unduly restrictive.

In summary, I look forward to getting my pre-paid copy of 1941: Road to Moscow in October, and I'd like to test the game with my Ares colleagues before then ... when it becomes safe to meet again and do so.

## **CAPSULE COMMENTS – 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent)**

**Physical quality: 5+** Even the playtest copy is VERY professional. Game's components are clear, attractive, and highly functional.

**Playability: 5** Now that I've more fully puzzled out the game system and experienced it, it does seem fairly simple. An 8 year old could grasp this.

**Playing time: 3-5** 120 minutes for a 3-German-player game seems VERY short, but with experienced ... and fast-playing ... players, that \*might\* be possible, and 120 minutes is ideal as GDW once promoted.

**Historicity: 3-4** Unit values seem quite accurate. Some map routes ... or lack of them ... are questionable. The reviewer remains bewildered by the supply transportation asset deployment & Reorganization mechanic. :-)

**Comparisons: 4+** More playable than most Barbarossa games. Certainly a good transition game between Euro and historical war game players. A very constructive addition to the boardgame hobby.

**Overall: 4+** A completely unique and vital addition to any Russian Front Barbarossa game collection and a fun game, if you like logistics and the potential for chaos arising and/or you causing it for your competitors. :-)

**My Overall BoardGameGeek Rating: 9**

**Lou Coatney**

**Flateby**

**Norway**

[ELCOAT@hotmail.com](mailto:ELCOAT@hotmail.com)

[www.CoatneyHistory.com](http://www.CoatneyHistory.com)

<http://LCoat.tripod.com>

*(Free/educational mil/nav history boardgames, cardstock model ship plans, etc.)*