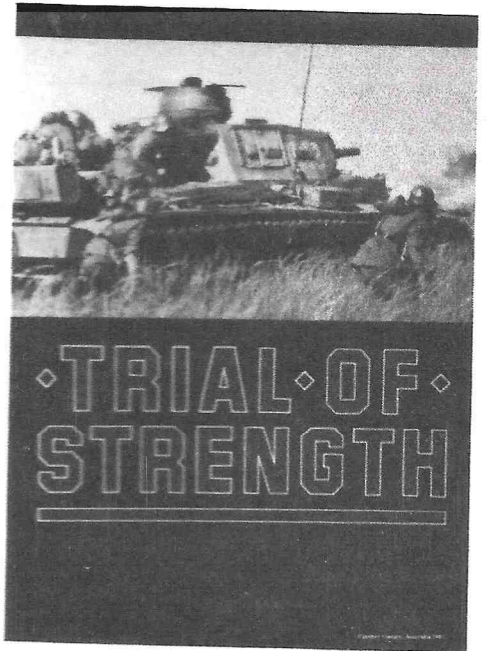


*Close-Up*

# ◆ TRIAL OF STRENGTH ◆

War on the Eastern Front, 1941-45



## Panther Games

P.O. Box 8

Hughes, A.C.T. 2605

Australia

**Design:** Dave O'Connor

**Development:** Peter Wyche, Steve Barnes, et al

**Production:** Dave O'Connor, Peter Wyche

**Graphics:** Chris Storey

**Topic:** The Russo-German War of 1941-1945

**Size:** Two mapsheets of Europe from the Aegean to North Cape and the Volga to the Wesers; 800 back-printed counters.

**Scale:** Units are generally corps for the Axis and armies for the Soviets; 45 miles per hex; three game turns per month. Alternating player turns

with non-player reaction and commitment of tactical air; extensive political system; reinforcement schedule and replacement points based on resource cities in lieu of complex unit production.

**Complexity:** Very high.

**Playing Time:** 5+ hours for introductory scenario; full campaign game very, very long.

**Solitaire Playability:** Introductory scenario good; campaigns only fair because of size and loss of strategic deception opportunities.

**Suitability for Postal Play:** Virtually impossible because of interactive system.

**Published:** Summer, 1985

**Price:** \$40.00 (and worth every penny).

Game's **The Civil War**, which is similar in many surprising ways to **Trial Of Strength** (more on this score anon), playing the game requires a high level of commitment and energy. Then again, maybe the correct way of describing it is that it generates a high level of commitment, and inevitably leads to a similar expenditure of energy. This game is definitely an absorbing one.

The map board is very well done artistically. It is large enough to give a feel of the scale of the campaign, but not so large as to force players to look only at small pieces of it at a time. There are two mapsheets, one 22-by-27 and the other 29-by-27. Almost half of the larger sheet is given over to a terrain chart and various game tracks. The area covered by the map stretches from Emden on the North Sea, southeast to Baku on the Caspian and from Crete northeast to Arkhangel. The center of the playing area is roughly at Minsk. Much of the map sees little play in most games (although the players are free to choose heavier-than-historical allocations of forces to Scandinavia or to the Balkans.) One cannot help but wonder whether Panther Games has visions of a Western Front "Test of Wills," shall we say. (The title is offered gratis. Frankly, I hope they do undertake such a project because, as discussed later, the game system appears to offer the best chance yet to simulate the campaigns in France without resort to inordinately artificial rules.)

Moving over this map are a large number of counters of many colors, representing the various national forces involved in the campaign. Most combat units are Axis corps or the equal-sized Soviet Army. A sprinkling of special smaller units (such as the Spanish Blue Division, or NKVD detachments) is also included. A nice touch is the provision of breakdown counters to allow larger formations to split up in order to cover wider areas. This is especially important because there are no zones of control in this game. An empty hex in a line thus becomes a magnet for rampaging armor units.

In addition to the ground combat units, counters include many supporting types. Air units represent either general tactical types used for ground support, escort and interdiction missions, or Air Transport Units used to airlift troops and supplies. Sea Transport units allow amphibious assaults or the maintenance of sea lines of communication. Motor Transport Units are also included, but these function differently from the other

## by Peter P. Perla

Operation Barbarossa. Case Blue. Leningrad, Moscow, Stalingrad. To those of us who grew up with wargaming in the Sixties, the epic struggle between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union was a fascination, an obsession, or a recurring nightmare. My first historical land boardgame was The Avalon Hill Game Company's classic **Stalingrad**. When James Dunnigan broke new ground with the landmark **Panzerblitz**, where else to set the game of tactical armored combat but the steppes of Russia? But the appetite seemed insatiable. The monster game, too, spawned in the Russian swamps along with Game Designer's Workshop and **Drang Nach Osten/Unentscheiden** (affectionately known as DONUT).

## The Charge

With the publication of **Trial Of Strength**, Panther Games returns us to the Eastern Front with a new game, a new perspective, and a new system. In his designer's notes, Dave O'Connor describes his "impatience and frustration at an industry which had largely lost its innovativeness," as a result of this dissatisfaction, he set out to design a game that "would simulate all the aspects of the military equation—infantry, armour, artillery, air power, command and control,

logistics, etc—but above all one which would simulate the interaction of forces and pay credence to the role of momentum." This he has done admirably, and in so doing he has significantly advanced the state of the art of modeling the dynamics of warfare at the operational and strategic level. He has also created perhaps the most comprehensive and coherent treatment of the theater yet produced, **Fire in the East** notwithstanding.

## Exhibit One: The Game

As the game's introduction so accurately describes it, **Trial Of Strength** is a "sophisticated but common-sense game." The 48-page rule book exemplifies this philosophy with some of the best practical suggestions for easing the player's burden that I have seen in print. The game's two maps and various off-board displays require a roughly one-by-two meter playing surface, which the rules suggest should be covered in perspex. Although not essential, this luxury will go a long way toward making life easier.

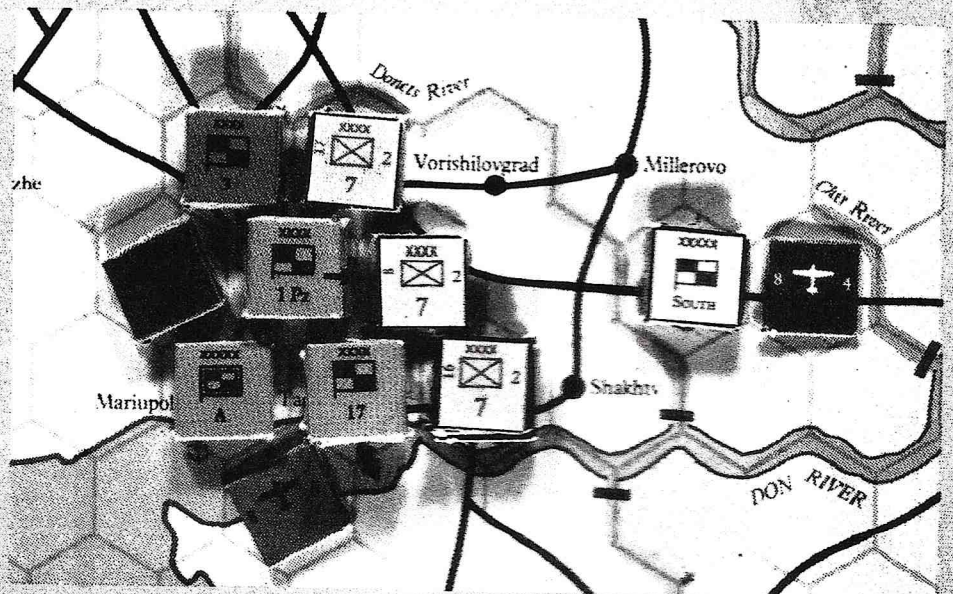
And making life easier is definitely worth the effort; the title of the game may easily refer to the game experience as well as to the struggle of the original combatants. Make no mistake, this is no beer and pretzels game. Like Victory

# EXAMPLE OF PLAY

This example of play barely begins to illustrate the subtlety and complexity of the system. It does, however, touch on most of the basic concepts.

The situation is the opening of Case Blau in July of 1942. Axis Army Group A, consisting of the 17th Army, 1st Panzer Army, and 3rd Rumanian Army, is poised to strike east from the Kramatorsk-Stalino-Taganrog line with the immediate objective of capturing Rostov. The Soviet line is fortified, but rather thinly held except for Rostov itself. The Southern Front does have a reduced tank army and a cavalry-mechanized group in reserve. (See figure 1.)

The action begins with the Axis supply phase. Both 17th Army and 1st Panzer Army have been marked for Prepared Attacks. All three armies are now allocated a supply point for Main Effort. There are no replacements to worry about, and the Axis player decides not to



transfer any air units, nor to begin construction of fortifications. Furthermore, the Rail Construction Unit at Taganrog has no place to go because Rostov is occupied by the Soviets.

The Axis player begins his movement and combat segment with 1st Panzer Army in the center of the line. He declares a Stack Attack against the 8th Army, spending four MPs (one to enter

the clear terrain hex with mechanized forces, one additional for the fortification, and two points to mount the attack). He also chooses a "1 air" chit and places it face down to signify his intention of committing the Rumanian air unit to support the attack. The Soviet player rolls the die to react, getting a four. Because this result is less than the Southern Front's initiative rating of five, the Soviet player may move any one

transport types. Their only role in the game is to extend the supply range of units they are stacked with. The counter mix also includes Partisan Zone counters to indicate areas dominated by partisan activity.

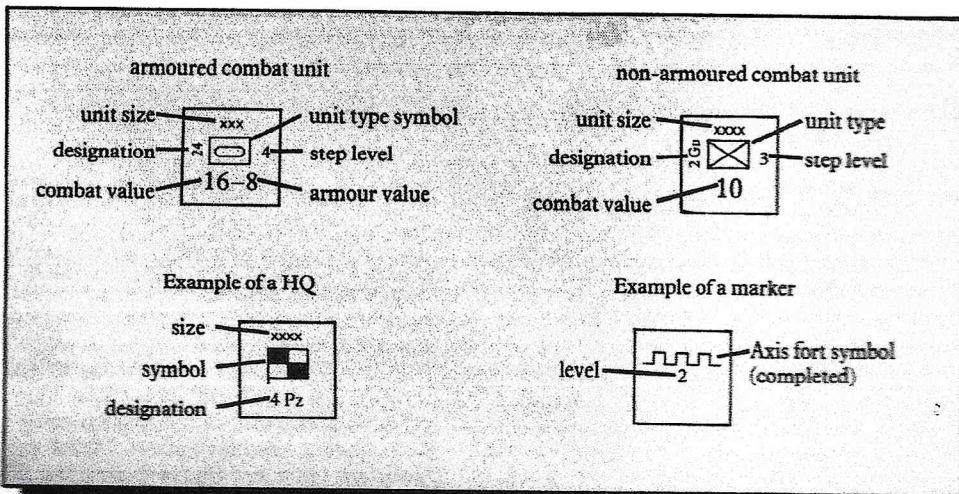
Most of the effects of partisans are abstracted, however, as are many other aspects of the campaign. Abstracted, but not ignored. Rail capacity is applied on a country by country basis, but each unit is

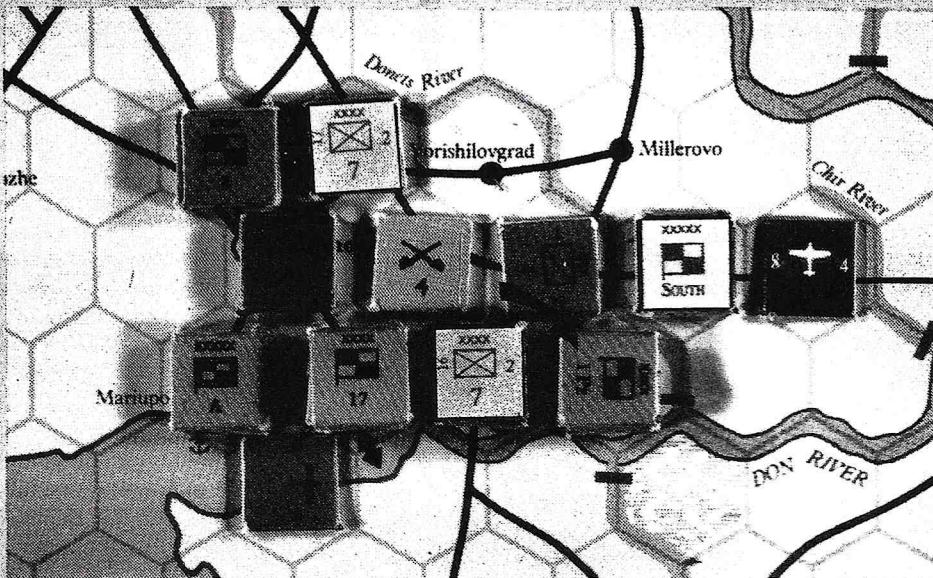
rated for the load value it uses up when moving by rail. Naval forces are abstracted by allowing each player an opportunity to interdict the other's sea transport missions with submarines. The Soviet Black Sea Fleet has no counter, but its gunfire support may be felt in coastal hexes. Finally, and to my knowledge a first in East Front games, river transport capacity is included. (This is one of those strange similarities to *The Civil War*, although no "Ironclads" are

included for river combat.) Other counters or markers include the all-important Rail Construction Units, a German Rail Gun Unit (Dora et al), and three levels of Axis and Soviet fortifications.

Perhaps the single most important units in the game, and a strong indicator of its philosophy, are the headquarters (HQ). These HQs come in two varieties. At the lower level are the Axis Army and Soviet Front headquarters. These are the combat workhorses, exerting a "direct influence on movement and combat, through their stacking, reaction, and combat capabilities." They can provide important combat odds shifts through Prepared Attacks and Main Effort supply status. Army Group/Theatre HQs are the higher echelon, coordinating operations over a wide area. They are the source of replacements and the distributors of supply for Army Main Effort Operations.

Virtually every aspect of the war is included in *Trial Of Strength*. Players may be unsure of just how they can send a reduced-strength mountain corps from Baku to Stalingrad by sea and river, but they will not have to question why they can't do so. This is the key to the game's "common sense" approach to simulation.





stack (not in the combat hex) within three hexes of the HQ, up to three MPs. He chooses to commit the 1st Cavalry-Mech Group to reinforce the combat hex, and marks it with a three MP penalty chit (the number of MPs it expends to reach the hex).

The Soviet player declares that he will commit no air units, and the Axis player reveals his chit, declaring the Rumanian

air unit to participate. Both sides now total their combat strength. The Axis has 36 points in two Panzer and one Cavalry Corps, plus eight for the Rumanian air, giving a total of 44. The Soviet has fourteen, giving raw combat odds of 3:1. The odds are shifted by +3 for armor ratio (the 16:3 ratio is initially 4:1 but shifted to 3:1 because of the fort), +2 for Axis Main Effort HQ, +1 for a Prepared Attack (the "P" marker is now

removed), and -1 for the Soviet fort. Final odds are thus 8:1.

The Axis player now rolls the die and is lucky enough to get a ten, for a -4R result. This means no loss to the Axis and the total elimination of the defenders because they only have four steps between them. The Axis player places a four combat zone marker in the hex and advances 1st Panzer Army into it, removing the fort.

The Axis player would now like to move 1st Panzer Army due east and conduct a combined attack against Rostov with 17th and 3rd Rumanian armies. Unfortunately, because one of the armies would have to enter the first combat hex to do so, he finds that this ploy is not possible. (Because of the four MP penalty, any unit wishing to enter the hex must use up four MPs before doing so. The infantry units in the other two armies would thus have to expend six MPs total, two points to enter a clear hex plus the four point combat zone cost, and they would still require three MPs to enter the Rostov hex and three more for a combined attack, a total of twelve, or two more than they have available.)

Instead of declaring an immediate

Virtually anything an Army, Theater, or National commander might want to do can be done in this game. The only thing I missed was not having individual leaders to assign to key commands. It would have been nice to see Guderian leading the last desperate lunge on Moscow or Zhukov orchestrating the victory at Stalingrad. The wonder of this game is that the mechanisms for neatly fitting such leaders into the system already exist in the mechanics for prepared attacks and other possible effects.

All of the forces and capabilities available to the original combatants are employed in alternating player turns that are so intertwined as to make the effects of each turn blend inevitably into the next. Each turn represents about ten days of real time, with the first turn of each month containing the bulk of administrative work. The full sequence of play is as follows:

#### Axis Operations Phase

- Strategic Air Transfer Segment (turn I only) — German may allocate air to the front or defense of the Reich.
- Allied Progress and Bombing Segment

(turn I only) — German checks to see effects of western front operations.

- Partisan Segment (turn I only) — Both sides allocate resources to Partisan campaign and resolve effects.
- Arrival Segment (turn I only) — Phasing reinforcements/withdrawals enter or leave, and supply and replacement points are received.
- Supply Segment — Check supply status and establish supply links. Put HQs on Main Effort. Non-phasing player may provide emergency resupply.
- Replacement Segment — Units may receive replacements, be rebuilt, or converted (into Guards, for example).
- Air Transfer Segment — Air units change base.
- Construction Segment — Forts and rail lines may be built, repaired or converted.
- Movement and Combat Segment — Integrated movement and combat, including enemy air operations and reaction.

#### Soviet Operations Phase

- Arrival Segment (turn I only)

- Supply Segment
- Replacement Segment
- Air Transfer Segment
- Construction Segment
- Movement and Combat Segment.

#### Game Turn Interphase

- Political Segment — Adjust victory points, check for political events, determine surrender.
- Weather Segment — Determine next turn's weather (clear, mud, snow, snow-freeze).
- Track Adjustment Segment — Move turn and weather markers. Remove Partisan zones in turn III.

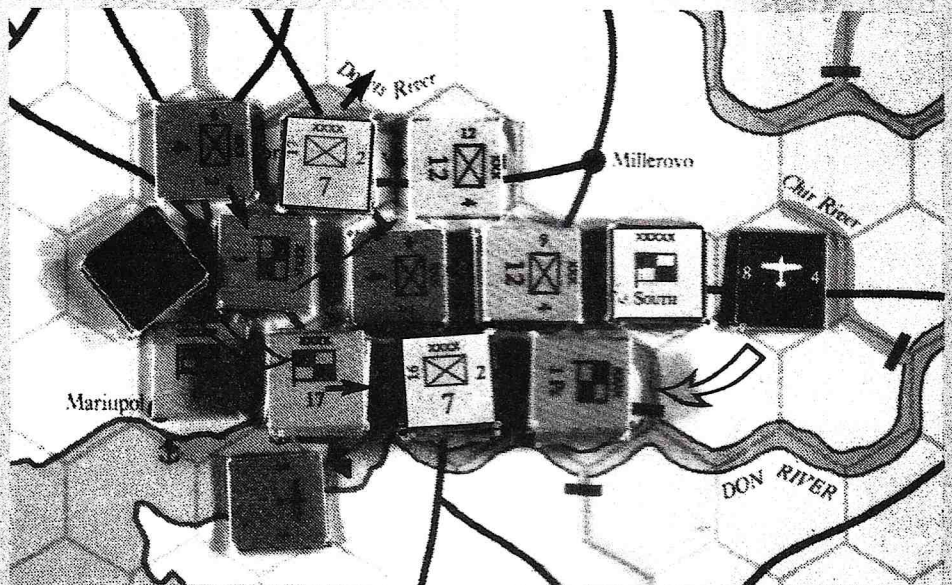
Thus, players prepare for operations in the first few segments of each turn and then launch their attacks in the last segment. The ultimate goal is to force the opponent to surrender, by occupying his capital. Failing that, seizing key cities or important areas can reduce the enemy's military capability and increase friendly political leverage.

There are five scenarios in the game,

attack on Rostov, he moves 1st Panzer Army one hex east. He would also like to occupy Shakhty to prevent reinforcements from reacting into Rostov from the east. Unfortunately, to do so would prevent those units from participating in the attack on Rostov (six movement points to Shakhty, plus two to enter Rostov, plus three for a combined attack is 11). Thus he faces the decision of launching both German armies against Rostov, risking the chance that the Soviet will reinforce, or of using 1st Panzer Army to isolate the city. He chooses the latter. "Dropping off" the Cavalry where it is (thus ending its movement), the rest of the Panzer Army occupies Shakhty and ends its movement there. (See figure 2).

Now to fill the void in the rear, the two reserve corps from Army Group A are pushed to the Donets, reinforcing the Cavalry and occupying Vorishilovgrad. The Rumanian 3rd Army now moves to cover Stalino, leaving one corps in Kramatorsk and "fanning out" another to occupy the combat hex. (See figure 3.)

Finally, the Axis declares a Stack Attack by 17th Army against Rostov, secretly committing the maximum of three air units from Stalino. The Soviet player again rolls for reaction and is again



successful. Because he can no longer reinforce Rostov, the Soviet player decides to extract the 17th Army from its perilous situation, moving it north across the Donets at a cost of three MPs, but leaving the fortification counter on the board (demolition may only occur in the friendly OP phase).

The Soviet player now commits his lone air unit to the defense of Rostov and

basic odds are calculated. The Axis have 36 points in the 17th Army and 40 (48 - 8) in the air for a total of 76. The Soviets have eighteen, for basic odds of 4:1. There are column shifts of +1 for Prepared Attack, +2 for Main Effort, -1 for the fort and -1 for the city. The final odds are thus 5:1. The German player rolls a seven, for a result of 1/2R. One German Corps is reduced. The Soviets now lose

allowing players to start in the middle of 1941, 1942, 1943, and 1944. One scenario (the "mini-scenario") is a subset of the 1942 scenario and deals only with the southern portion of the campaign (Case Blau and Operation Uranus) until March 1943. Orders of battle and starting locations (sketched out on reduced-sized copies of the map) are provided. Players may end a scenario any time, and compare the results to an historical victory point schedule. "If the totals are equal then it's an historical draw. If the actual total exceeds the historical total the Axis have done well. If it is less than the historical total the Soviets have done well. A margin of "+/- 5 is significant, and one of +/- 10 is decisive." Apparently the 1942 mini-scenario, the ideal introduction to the game, also was to have some specific victory conditions, but they were not, in fact, included in the package.

## Exhibit Two: The Perspective

Consciously or unconsciously, most wargames cast players into specific

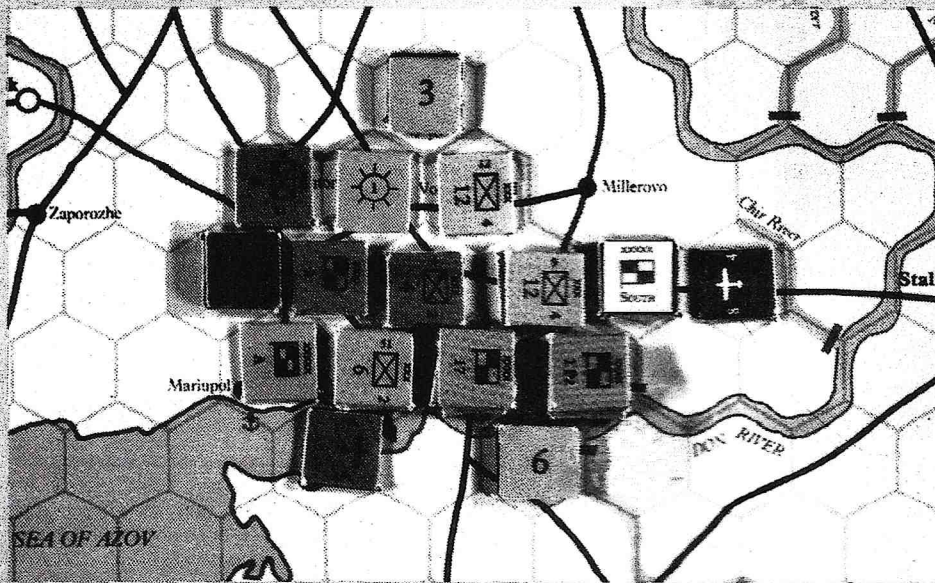
operational roles, usually more than one. Good designs recognize this fact, and tailor their systems to allow players to function effectively in two or at most three such roles. Too often with games covering the entire German-Soviet war, however, the size and scope of the struggle has tempted designers to forget to apply these principles.

In all games dealing with the East Front as a whole, players are called upon to represent, at a minimum, the army high command of each side, directing all ground operations. In *Stalingrad*, this is essentially the only player role. Each corps-level playing piece is maneuvered as a self-contained unit, with no intermediate command levels. In many ways *Drang Nach Osten* and the *Fire In The East* revision suffer from this same problem, replacing corps by divisions. However, these games effectively add what amounts to a field army level command function to the player's role as generalissimo. My experience, primarily with the older version of the game, indicates that much of the play centers around the local operations of a number of corps-sized stacks of divisions and supporting units, essentially an army. There are other

intermediate functions performed by the players, but the vast majority of experiences are tailored for the high command and army levels.

*Trial Of Strength* introduces a new perspective at this full-front game level, and adds new touches to an old one. Of necessity, players represent the supreme command, but not just of the ground forces. In the most complete and integrated approach to the war yet, players must coordinate all arms and capabilities to best advantage, even the limited and abstracted naval capabilities. In these roles players primarily, and realistically, make resource allocation decisions. (Here is another similarity to *The Civil War*.) Strategic direction is given to the war effort through the allocation of troops and replacements, headquarters, transportation assets, and, most importantly, supplies.

At the lower level of counter manipulation, successful play requires the assumption of an army group/theater commander's roles. Available supplies must be distributed to the right army headquarters to keep the offensive moving (through the 2-column odds shift



two steps, and because they have multiple units present must remove losses from at least two of them. Both infantry armies are reduced. Because the Soviet player does not want to give up Rostov he decides to accept the additional step loss required to hold the hex, if possible. (Note that a 3R result would have given Rostov to the Germans because the extra loss to hold the hex would have been two

steps for a total of five, equal to the total Soviet garrison.) The defenders must now check their morale. The NKVD unit has a base morale of eight and this increases by one for the city and one for the fort. Thus the NKVD automatically passes the morale check. The two line units have a base morale of six, which is raised to eight by the city and fort and nine by the presence of the NKVD unit.

Unfortunately for the Soviet player, both morale checks result in a roll of ten, causing both units to fail. However, because the NKVD held, the entire stack is considered to have held, but the extra step loss must be taken by the NKVD unit, which is removed from play. The two surviving, reduced armies are marked with a 3-point movement penalty.

The Axis attack is not yet over. The 17th Army has spent only five MP (two to enter the hex, one for the fort, and two for the Stack Attack). The Axis player expends the last five MP to attack again. The Soviet player does not attempt a reaction. With no air left to commit on either side, the odds are 33:8 or 4:1. Combat shifts are +2 for Main Effort (the Prepared Attack no longer applies), and 2 for the fort and city, so the final odds are 4:1. The German player now rolls a four, producing a 1/1R result. The German reduces the already reduced 4th Corps, and one Soviet army is eliminated. Because holding the hex would require losing another step, thus eliminating the last defending unit, the surviving Soviet army retreats to the south, marked with a six MP movement penalty. Leaving the reduced corps, and RCU, at Taganrog (to pick up replacements next turn), 17th Army advances into Rostov. (See figure 4.)

for Main Effort supply) or to blunt the opponent's drive (through main effort and fortification). Replacements must be allocated and forces pulled off the line to receive them, or the dwindling spearheads must push on without relief.

These roles provide a fresh look at one of the most frequently gamed campaigns of World War II, and challenge players to develop new approaches to maneuvering vast mechanized armies. No longer can a corps fight one day in front of Minsk and the next at the gates of Leningrad. No longer must players concern themselves about arcane calculations of armor percentages in attack force. For the first time, a realistic sense of planning at the operational level becomes not only possible, but essential. Yet the system is flexible enough to allow players to discard old plans and exploit an unexpected opportunity. It is to this last topic that we now turn our attention.

## Exhibit Three: The System

The heart of *Trial Of Strength*, in a

very literal sense, is the Conventional Land-Warfare Integrated Movement and Combat System (CLIMACS). At the center of this system is an approach to "continuous or integrated movement and combat," the rudiments of which have been seen before, especially in James Dunnigan's modern warfare games like *The Next War*. The previous realizations of this approach have always seemed somewhat flawed. There was not enough chance of coordination and the sequencing of events seemed to be wrong. These systems just did not feel right. CLIMACS makes several crucial additions to the basic concept that go a long way toward fixing these problems.

The first innovation allows for different types of combined movement, thus increasing flexibility. Stacks may merge or split up. Multiple stacks may coordinate an attack on a single hex, and even advance ("fan out") after combat, at the price of limiting post-attack operations.

To this increase in attacker flexibility is added an effective means for the defender to protect himself. If a non-phasing headquarters unit is within three hexes of

a combat hex it may roll against its initiative rating to try to move one stack of units. This reaction movement can be used to reinforce the threatened hex or reposition reserves to back up the line. This element of the system increases the dynamic feeling of the game. It also illustrates the importance of mechanized units in reserve (they go farther, faster, and hit harder when they get there).

Finally, combat and reaction cost units movement points, which in *Trial Of Strength* come closer than in most other games to representing the time it takes forces to do things. The attacker expends movement points to engage in combat. The defender must also expend movement points to engage in combat, for reaction, and for participating in the battle. These costs vary with conditions, and may be the most important innovation introduced by *Trial Of Strength*. (It is this approach that strikes me as the key to modeling the situation in France in 1940.)

When the phasing player declares an attack he may choose one of three levels: A "small force" attack (basically a single

corps-sized unit plus one smaller unit); a "stack attack" (any legal single stack or portion thereof); or a combined attack (multiple stacks). These attacks cost the phasing units involved one, two, or three movement points in addition to the costs of entering the defender's hex. After combat is resolved, a numbered "combat zone" marker, whose value is equal to the total current movement point expenditure of the attackers, is placed in the combat hex. During the rest of that player turn, only units that have already expended at least that many movement points, or that burn up that many points "waiting around," may enter the hex. (See the

**"There can hardly be any question that TRIAL OF STRENGTH is one of the best game designs of the year."**

example of play.)

In addition to marking the combat hex, any surviving defending units are marked with a movement penalty one point greater than the attacker's combat cost (for example, defenders in a stack attack get a three movement point penalty). A similar penalty is accrued by reacting units. These penalties are deducted from the non-phasing units' movement allowance in their next friendly operations segment.

Actual combat resolution uses a step reduction system implemented with back-printed counters. Most Soviet units have two steps and most German units four, nicely reflecting the philosophical differences between the two sides. (The Soviets would allow a unit to be burned up and then replace it with a new formation while the Germans tended to forward replacements to units on line.) This combat system generally calls for both sides to take some losses (except at extreme odds) and often calls on the defender to retreat. However, if the defending units can pass a morale check, they may hold their hex at the cost of additional losses. The system effectively

allows both rapid breakthroughs and fluid mobile operations against thinly-held sectors of the front, and slow, grinding attrition battles when unit densities increase.

As stated earlier, armor is the ideal strike and reserve force. Not only do mechanized units move at twice the rate of leg units in clear terrain, but their vaunted "shock" value is also taken into account. Each mechanized unit is rated for its "armor value" in addition to a standard combat strength. When determining combat odds, players compare total attacking and defending armor values. The player with the greater total then receives from one to four favorable odds column shifts. Because a stack with no mechanized units can never have an armor value of more than one, unsupported infantry can become meat for the ravaging panzers. (For example, a single German panzer corps with a combat strength of twelve and Armor value of eight, attacking two Soviet line infantry armies with combat strength fourteen and armor value one, would have the odds go from 1-1.5 (12 to 14) to 3-1, increasing the odds of a retreat result from 10 percent to 80 percent.)

It is impossible for this review to describe all the intricate interconnections of the CLIMACS system. Partly, this is because I'm sure that I haven't found all of them yet, despite several weeks of intense study and play. Frankly, I can think of no greater compliment to the system's designer. Again, like *The Civil War*, this is not a game system to "crack," but one to savor.

## Summation

There can hardly be any question that *Trial Of Strength* is one of the best game designs of the year. Indeed, this reviewer would rate it one of the best ever. The designer's notes tell us it evolved over at least three years of work, and the care lavished on it is obvious.

Oh, of course it's not perfect. There were a few errata included (leaving the oil well off Ploesti was truly an amazing oversight), and I had a few questions about some rules, but all of these were relatively insignificant. Perhaps the single biggest uncertainty was exactly how forces were to be set up using the deployment maps. It wasn't clear if all hexes in the designated front lines have to be occupied, but that does seem to be the intent, and the logical solution. The "common sense" approach of the design pays off even when there are questions,

because the answers are usually found by applying the general principles so well stated in the rules to the particular details in question.

The only real potential problem with *Trial Of Strength* is another of its similarities to *The Civil War*. Both games take a long time to play. A very long time. The first player-turn of the 1942 mini-scenario took your admittedly over-conscientious reviewer more than one and a half hours the first time I played it. The first turn of the 1941 campaign scenario, even after some experience with the system, took about the same. Fortunately, the learning curve is fairly steep and, just as in the real war, there are lulls in the bloodletting as both sides try to catch their breath (and their supplies and replacements). I would not even venture a guess as how long a full 1941-1945 game between two people might take.

Fortunately, the game and the system are such that multiplayer participation is positively enhanced. The basis of a command separation is already built into the army and army group structure. The CLIMACS system makes it easy for players to work on different parts of the front without causing later problems. The biggest difficulty is that it is unlikely for different parts of the front to be active simultaneously (except, of course, during the initial German invasion). Because an active region takes much longer to play than a relatively quiet one, some players could get bored. Of course, this problem is not usually a very serious one.

## The Verdict

*Trial Of Strength* is not for everyone. It is not an evening's entertainment, nor a weekend's diversion. It is an intense, demanding simulation of the most violent and bloody land conflict in history. It will reward your commitment of time and energy by enmeshing you in an alternate reality of truly epic proportions. It will help you see things about the Russo-German war you may never have seen before. It will challenge all your strategic, organizational, and operational gaming skills as they have never been challenged before. It will almost certainly revolutionize boardgame approaches to this level of warfare. It is, quite simply, the best game ever produced on its subject.

