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THE FIRST BLITZKRIEG

THE CAMPAIGN OF *POLAND* '39

by Jim Werbaneth

Just as there is a model of game design encompassed by the Avalon Hill "Classics" and the SPI quads, there is a paradigm associated with the games of XTR Corporation and *Command* magazine. Though associated first and foremost with the design work of editor Ty Bomba, it was also incorporated into other designs by other designers, perhaps with the most success in Ted Raicer's early work on World War I, and came to be as much a defining characteristic of *Command* as anything.

It is essentially conservative, with the movement-combat sequence of play of its Avalon Hill and SPI predecessors. Unlike them, combat between adjacent belligerent is undertaken at the discretion of the phasing player, and results are expressed numerically, not so much in terms of exchange, elimination or retreat. An affected player can put a combat result into action through elimination of combat steps, retreats, or both.

Unlike the equally iconic *Panzergruppe Guderian* (SPI/Avalon Hill) system, or Vance Von Borrie's more recent *East Front Series* (GMT), there is no dedicated mechanized movement phase for exploitation after combat. With them, the *Command* system shares a provision for overrun, which in this case is termed "mechanized assault." In a prototypical *Command* game, mechanized assault takes place with little or no penalty to combat strength, just an extra movement point expenditure. Playing such a game well usually calls for skill at using this means of attack, and especially discerning the best times and places for it, and when to wait to execute a more conventional combat.

There is no provision for facing *per se*. However, the XTR model calls for "concentric attack," in which the attacker receives a column shift for attacking from two or three opposite sides. Though the game might not ever use the forbidden words *flanks* and *rear*, the concentric attack rule effectively simulates what happens when a unit is attacked from those directions.

Zones of control vary from game to game, and sometimes are not present at all. In no case do they have the impact of those in the SPI quads or Avalon Hill Classics, due to the discretionary nature of combat.

Never look for roads or railroads in a game designed according to the *Command* paradigm. Supply rules are generally simple, with provision for long logistical lines, traceable over most terrain directly to the source, instead of relying on networks of roads and rails, as in other games. Consequently there is no rail movement either, as strategic

movement or redeployment permits eligible units to move from city to city, or move conventionally with increased allowances, as long as they do not go near enemy units.

There is one other characteristic, more cosmetic and for the convenience of players than for any simulation value. Games on the *Command* model use large hexes and 5/8" counters.

Bomba's *Poland '39* is an XTR game, published separately from *Command* in 1992. It is one of the best examples of a game design on the *Command* model, and presents the players, especially the German, with some interesting strategic challenges.

GERMANY RISING

Poland '39 effectively highlights the differences in composition, quality and doctrine of the combatants. Hardly surprising in the light of history, the German Wehrmacht comes across as a highly effective, state-of-the-art army, spearheaded by a potent set of mechanized divisions.

Despite the crucial role of the panzers, infantry still makes up the bulk of the German army. The combat strength of Hitler's divisions tend not to be much better than those of the Polish army, and in some cases is actually inferior. They do have a major advantage though in that all are two-step units, and therefore can take casualties without immediately falling apart.

The panzer divisions are even more robust, with up to six steps, mandating the use of replacement counters. In the historical scenario especially, however, the German player will seldom sustain more than one or two step losses to all of his panzer units combined, not if he stands any chance of winning.

The mechanized arm of the Wehrmacht is the greatest asset that the German side has. The power of the units, particularly in the attack, even more than their robustness makes them the ideal offensive units for an army with the mission of destroying another country in short order.

They have even more advantages. Panzer and "combined arms" divisions, the game's depiction of the "Light" (*Lechte*) mechanized infantry divisions that later evolved into additional panzer divisions, are the only ones in any army in the game that can undertake mechanized assaults.



Poland's eastern border, including Danzig and the "Polish Corridor." Similar to many other games from XTR, there are no railroads, with rail and other administrative movement handled through a strategic redeployment mechanism.

Other German motorized units can participate, but only in the same stack and in concert with these types.

The convention for operational-level games of World War II and later conflicts, not just those designed according to the *Command* model, is to permit units that mechanized assault/overrun to make regular attacks in the ensuing combat phase. Perhaps because the Polish campaign was the first of the war, in which the blitzkrieg was unproven and no one had any live fire experience with it whatsoever, *Poland '39* presents an exception: Units that make mechanized assaults in the movement phase cannot attack in the combat phase.

This places an even greater burden on the German player to ration his mechanized assaults, as opting to exploit one advantage of his mechanized arm prevents them from employing other assets, which might yield greater results at lower risk. In regular attacks, the more valuable motorized forces should combine with regular infantry whenever possible, so that any casualties to the Germans can be apportioned to the groundpounders.

More useful than mechanized assaults, German motorized units have a special ability to move through zones of control. They can move past enemy units, and pass through gaps in the Polish lines, at cost of two extra movement points for moving directly from one enemy zone of control to another. This can create opportunities for concentric attacks, so that one narrow hole can turn into a much larger one, and render the line untenable.

In blitzkrieg-oriented games, one frequent phenomenon is for the side with the offensive to pocket enemy units, place them out of supply, and take advantage of their weakened condition to destroy them. This happens a lot less often in *Poland '39* because zones of control do not sever supply lines; to place a unit out of supply, one has to totally surround it, or otherwise place a solid ring of units around its supply source, or seize control of it outright. Thus pockets need to be reduced by more substantial forces than one might expect, and might even counterattack.

The Germans have a monopoly on effective airpower in the game. Its primary benefit is tactical support of ground combats, normally German attacks, but occasionally in support when the Poles counterattack. Air units can also fly interdiction missions, which impede the ability of selected Polish stacks to move during their own player turn.

The Luftwaffe further offers a one-time aerial offensive named, after the historical bombardment of Warsaw that forced its surrender, Operation Seaside. Executed against a city completely surrounded by the Wehrmacht, it freezes both the Germans and the city's defenders in place, unable to either move or attack. If the ring remains unbroken at the end of the German combat phase, then the city surrenders----All the defenders are eliminated, and the Germans can execute an advance as though after combat.

The Luftwaffe also has an embryonic airborne capability. Historically though, Poland did not mark the advent of the German *fallschirmjäger*; that would wait until May 1940 and the invasion of the Netherlands.

POLAND UNDER FIRE

Poland's army is not the right one for fighting a fast-paced mechanized campaign. It is overwhelmingly comprised of infantry, with no proper mechanized arm. There are a couple of units classified under the combined arms label, but these are really mechanized cavalry, too light to contend with the tanks of the blitzkrieg, and devoid of the doctrine for mobile warfare that makes the Wehrmacht's panzer arm decisive.

What the Poles have in the way of mobile units are the horse cavalry. The cliché of Polish troopers charging tanks and breaking their lances on Krupp steel is a myth; the Polish horsemen were more like mounted infantry, on the model used with some success by the Soviets in the Great Patriotic War. However, without either the mobility and blitzkrieg doctrine of the German armor, or the firepower of the infantry, the Polish cavalry is the wrong arm for the new battlefields.

The Polish army is further hindered by its lack of durability in combat. All but the smallest German units have at least two steps; no Polish unit has more than one. Therefore nearly every time that the Germans attack a Polish stack, except in the first turn, they will kill at least one Polish unit. In addition, a German division on its own in a

hex can usually survive any counterattack, not that there will be very many, that the Poles might mount, but a Polish division left alone will die at the German player's convenience.

Nature is no ally of Poland. The country has been described at times as being one without any natural frontiers. Except for the Carpathian Mountains in the south, this is one cliché that happens to be true. There are few natural defensive positions, no equivalent of the Rhine for Germany and France, no Alps for Italy, no Channel for England. The game accurately depicts Poland as a plain, broken by some river lines, and with a few forests. If there is any really defensible terrain, it is in the east, facing the USSR, where the Pripyet Marshes and nearby forests restrict the Soviets' invasion routes.

THE FIRST TURN

Going back to the days of *France 1940* (SPI/Avalon Hill), many players have acquired a view of blitzkrieg-type games in which the attacker starts off thunderously, ripping holes in the enemy armies, in many instances winning the campaign on the first turn. The game might go on for a few more weeks or months, but that time sees the aggressor building on his initial successes, more than trying to set up the decisive battle sometime later. Even in games on Barbarossa, which might assume that the Germans will need to get a second wind to make the final assault on Russia's two greatest cities, the first turns see them devastate the Soviet frontline military districts and acquire the momentum that will carry them to Orel and Bryansk, if not Moscow and Leningrad.

Poland '39 reverses the pattern of the initial player turn, in ways that are definitely counterintuitive to most experienced wargamers. It is quite common for the aggressor to benefit from special rules to hamstring his opponent at the beginning, but in *Poland '39*, all the first-turn special rules work against the Wehrmacht. German units have their full movement allowances, but are prohibited from advancing more than one hex across the Polish border. When they attack, the Germans cannot achieve odds better than seven to one, which precludes automatic elimination of the defenders at no cost to the attackers. Even at the highest allowable odds, the Poles have the extraordinary ability to assess any combat result as a one-hex retreat, with no step losses necessary. Furthermore, there are no mechanized assaults permitted.

On the other hand, when on the attack the Germans are still subject to all that the combat results table has to offer, and it works out to be quite dangerous for the phasing player. At six to one odds, there is a one in six chance that the attacker will suffer a step loss, at five to one a one in three chance, and at four to one combat odds three out of six possible die rolls hurt the attacker. In many games this does not seem like a very severe handicap, but *Poland '39* demands that the German player keep his casualties to the barest minimum, no more than fifteen steps for the entire game, with mechanized losses counting triple.

All of this demands that the German player look at the first turn of the game in a much different manner than he might feel is right. Instead of being the turn in which he rips the front wide open, the initial turn is the one in which the German just sets himself up in a better position. He might initiate a few combats at most, at high odds, but always with the view that even though the risks remain as high as ever, the returns on attacking decline to such a point that most combats are not worth the trouble to him. Sustaining seven or eight casualty points without doing more than pushing back some Polish units one hex is not the way to start a German victory, not when there are eleven more turns of hard fighting left in the game.

Justifying these first-turn restrictions in terms of history does not really make a lot of sense. The designer argues that nobody had any experience yet, but that goes for both sides, and one can easily make the counterargument that the Poles, caught off guard by the new means and methods of warfare and needing to react to German moves, would be the ones with the greater handicaps.

However, *Poland '39*'s view of the first game turn works very well in game terms. Without it, the Germans are liable to take an insurmountable lead, even one beyond the realm of plausible history, and cruise to victory. With it, *Poland '39* is a much more competitive game.

There is one more first-turn German restriction that makes sense as history as well as design for effect, though. When the game begins, the Germans have no Luftwaffe support of any kind. However, the case is easily made that the German air force is occupied striking airfields and shooting down enemy aircraft, to make sure that there is no Polish air force.

The Poles have to utilize the defensive strengths of manmade features. Towns and cities are really too few and far apart to function as redoubts, but there are fortifications scattered about the country, many of which are really fortified towns such as Brest (also known as Brest-Litovsk), Mława, Modlin, and Przemysł.

These are not very imposing works, however. They just reduce the combat result against any Polish defenders by one, generally, to make a fortification hold out for at least two turns, the player needs to have at least four units inside. Even then, the Polish side seldom has a surplus of units to spare in such strongpoints, which are easily bypassed, so that troops defending a fort are better used defending Warsaw or the escape routes out of the country.

THE PROBLEMS OF VICTORY

Looking at *Poland '39* with a cold eye, Poland has no chance. It will be overwhelmed. There are too many Germans, and they are far too powerful and, more than anything, they have the mechanized forces to dictate a fast pace to the campaign in which the Poles cannot effectively compete. Defining the character of the war is the first element of seizing and holding the strategic initiative, and the Wehrmacht has the tools to do it.

Poland, on the other hand, has the wrong army, a force more suitable for fighting in 1918 than 1939. Then again, there were very few armies in the world that had a clue of what a mechanized campaign could and should be; the Soviets came the closest in the 1930's, prior to Stalin's purges of the armed forces, and in the two months before the invasion of Poland, gave a small demonstration against the Japanese on the edge of the Gobi Desert. In the west, only some officers on the fringes of the establishment could see beyond the obsolete questions of whether tanks belonged supporting the marching infantry or taking the roles, or only supporting, of the horse cavalry.

The Poles had the wrong army, and the wrong outlook. But in September 1939, so did just about everybody.

Poland '39 addresses the obvious issues of play balance by imposing victory conditions that place a heavy burden on the German player to meet or surpass the accomplishments of his historical counterparts. Just crushing Poland is never enough.

There are three requirements for the Germans to win the game. The first is to rid the map of all Polish units by the twelfth turn, the thirty-sixth day of the campaign. The second is to prevent more than fifteen points worth of Polish units from escaping to neutral countries; basically, each fully-mobilized division is worth three evacuation points, and all other counters are worth a single point. The third is to accomplish all this while losing less than fifteen casualty points (again, mechanized steps count triple). If the German player fails to achieve any of the three, then his opponent wins.

All in all, the game is fairly well balanced, and the Poles *can* win. In addition, the emphasis on flight off the map is historical and well-reasoned, as the Poles who made it out of the country came back to exact payback, with interest. They would fight alongside the British in Africa and Italy, with the Canadians in France, and as part of a Soviet-sponsored Polish army, in the USSR-----and Poland.

The Germans should have two main centers of gravity. The first is the obvious one of taking Warsaw, either by storm or through the execution of Operation Seaside. Warsaw has no worth in the game as the capital and cultural and economic center of Poland; its value is as the sole fully-functioning supply source for the Polish army. Cut off from their supply source, the units that remain will be unable to fight or flee to the best of their ability, and will be easy for the Germans to mop up.

The second is less apparent at first, but equally important. That is to prevent the evacuation of enough Polish units to deny victory. This usually means a drive to south, with significant mechanized forces, followed by infantry. A heavy concentration of Polish units south of Lublin means that the game starts with troops in position to run for sanctuary in Romania; the Germans have to seal off the escape route, and wipe out the Karpaty (Carpathian) Army and Tarnow Group of reserves.

The nature of the blitzkrieg is to dictate the character of the campaign, and fight the battles on the attacker's own terms. That combat between adjoining enemy forces takes place at the choosing of the phasing player makes this much easier, as the attacker is not required to make low-odds "soak off" attacks. The German should concentrate forces to make high-odds attacks whenever possible, adding air support and the benefits of concentric attack, especially from mechanized units that passed through gaps, to push the odds even higher. The ideal German attack is not a question; it is anything at eight to one or higher odds, in which the Poles automatically die, at no risk to the attackers.

There are cases in which the German has little choice but to attack on less favorable terms, and these present the Poles with some of their best chances to inflict casualties on the invaders. On the Baltic Coast, the Naval Group division at Gdynia, and presumably including the defenders of Westerplatte in Danzig Harbor, has to be overcome at some point, and the combination of town terrain, fortification, and location beyond the main axes of advance-----making it a secondary objective to be attacked by limited forces-----means that the Poles stand a good chance of making the Germans pay to clear the area.

On a greater scale, the Germans in East Prussia should not make a major effect on their front at the beginning. They have the shortest route to Warsaw, but the weakest motorized forces, and face some of the more difficult terrain. Their front is wooded, fronted by the Narew and then the Vistula Rivers, and fortified at Mława, Rozan and Modlin. In addition, the northern front is defended by sufficient Poles to make life an adventure.

Instead, it is better to turn the flanks of the Poles on their northern border by advancing from the northwest through the “Polish Corridor” around Danzig. The panzers and motorized infantry that begin in Pommerania can move laterally, forcing the Polish player to extend his lines, and try to break the lines anywhere along the front.

Polish strategy is reactive but not passive. There will be few opportunities for counterattack, but plenty to frustrate the enemy. A dogged defense might draw out the game, though luck is necessary if the player is going to cause enough casualties to deny victory to the Germans or, less probably, have at least one surviving counter on the

THE RED ARMY IN POLAND

Necessarily, most of the attention on the Axis attack centers on the Wehrmacht, the prime mover in the conquest of Poland. There is a second army in *Poland '39* though, one more frequently associated with fighting the Germans instead of helping them out: That of the Soviet Union.

Not counting single units of the Lithuanian and Latvian armies, included as variants, the Red Army has the fewest counters of any in the game. However, they have the greatest combat strength, being on the scale of corps and armies instead of the usual regiments and divisions. Their preferred mode of attack is at maximum odds, or something close to it, obliterating all in their path. Considering that the bulk of the Polish army will be elsewhere, either defending against the Germans or trying to escape them, the main force of the Red Army will fall upon a secondary Polish front.

Yet the Soviet army is crucial to the German side, and necessary to win. Each Polish unit unceremoniously consigned to the dead pile is one less that can flee to neutral territory and thus gain escape points. Similarly, the Red Army should drive toward the neutral borders and the south edge of the map to cut off the escape routes for the remaining Poles.

Despite their high combat ratings, the Soviet units in *Poland '39* represent a very pessimistic view of their army. They have two steps each, making them brittle under fire. This is an army that should attack at seven- or, better yet, eight to one odds, as anything less is an unacceptable gamble.

The reasons for a poor view of the Soviet armed forces in 1939 are abundant, and abundantly valid. Stalin’s paranoid purges of the officer ranks decimated the morale of the Red Army, and demolished much of its heretofore considerable institutional professionalism. In the process, the organization and doctrine of mechanized operations, was purged along with their proponents.

As Ty Bomba points out in the game, the sad state of the Red Army would be exposed for all the world to see in the Winter War of 1939-1940 against Finland. Then in 1941, the meeting of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army on opposite sides would nearly doom the Soviet Union to extinction.

There were signs however that the Red army was not necessarily a complete cesspool of incompetence and ineffectiveness. In the summer of 1939, immediately before the invasion of Poland, a corps-sized force on the Mongolian-Manchurian border executed a brilliantly overwhelming attack on the Japanese army along the Halha River. The Russians and Mongolians named the episode for their name for the Halha, Khalkhin Gol, and the Japanese referred to it as the Nomonhan Incident, after a village on the contested frontier.

The Soviets absorbed a series of armored, infantry, and artillery attacks in July, even then showing that the Soviet army of 1939 was not the Imperial Russian army of 1905. The next month, under the command of Georgi Zhukhov, they launched a mechanized counterattack in August that astounded the enemy for its power and the Soviet ability to must the requisite supplies and transport. The Japanese at Nomonhan were enveloped from north and south and systematically destroyed.

Khalkin Gol/Nomonhan offers an interesting counter to the defeats suffered early in the Winter War and Barbarossa that have given the Red Army of the time the reputation of a great, lumbering beast, devoid of intelligence, imagination or overall skill at arms. Just as the actions against Finland and Germany showed the worst of what the Soviet army was, the small campaign against Japan demonstrated what it could be, and by the end of World War II, would be.

The Soviet army portrayed in *Poland '39* represents the majority view of the USSR’s military capabilities in the interregnum between the purges and the German invasion. In fact, within three months of the end of the Soviet mechanized victory at Nomonhan, the Red Army disbanded the last of its mechanized corps, fully adopting a doctrine of employing tanks in smaller numbers for infantry support. Instead of learning the right lessons from the short, vicious conflict with Japan, the Soviets adopted the wrong lessons they thought they had learned from the Spanish Civil War.

In the long view of history, the victory in the Far East was an aberration of the time, in large part made possible by the generalship and mastery of the operational art demonstrated by one man: Zhukov. All things considered, the designer’s relatively negative appraisal of the Red Army in the game is probably the correct one for that time and place.

THE CORRECTIONS

One of *Command's* better practices was to update and correct XTR games in the pages of the magazine. This included errata, but often went further, to include new counters, both replacements for originals with errors, and new ones for variants.

Poland '39 benefits from new units published in *Command* Issue 19 (November-December 1992) and Issue 20 (January-February 1993). These are more than the usual corrections for typographical errors, or optional counters. The new counters alter the orders of battle to reflect research, and design decisions, made after the game's publication.

The designer gave Poland a couple of units that, in the actual campaign, crossed the border into Romania so early that he had originally elected to remove them from the Polish order of battle. By the time of *Command* Issue 20's layout, he had reconsidered, and added them to the game.

There are no basic corrections for the Soviet order of battle, but Issue 19 provides the counters for a much larger Soviet commitment, primarily for a scenario in which Stalin sides with the Poles instead of his German temporary co-conspirators. The next magazine introduces four-step combined arms mobile groups to replace the original two-step ones, but only if the player controlling the Soviets removes one infantry and two non-infantry corps.

The second issue also presents a complete rethinking of the German reinforcement schedule. It removes one German infantry division, as post-publication research indicated that it was actually deployed in the West throughout the game's time frame, and adds five new ones.

map at the end of the game.

The Poles' best opportunity to win is through evacuation. It is the element of the victory conditions in which the Polish player has the most control over his own fate, and from the beginning he should position his outlying units, especially in the south, for the dash to borders.

CONCLUSIONS

It will probably never achieve the place in wargaming history, or the prominence in the memories of aging wargamers, of the Avalon Hill "Classics" and SPI quads, but XTR's definitive game system does have a similar identity. Its titles have a remarkably consistent system; some might say *too* consistent, shoehorning disparate campaigns into similar frameworks. It is familiar, and once learned, the special rules and circumstances of the individual games easily assimilated. Finally, it stresses the elements of the game over the more esoteric elements of his-

tory. In the dichotomy of game versus history, the *Command* family chooses the former.

This is not to say that they lack any sort of simulation value. Particularly if one accepts the validity of designing for effect, the games do tend to mirror the larger patterns of the history that they purport to simulate. In addition, some embody excellent order of battle research.

Poland '39 is an excellent example of the *Command* approach to game design. It embraces all of the defining characteristics, right down to the large hexes and counters, as well as the ease of learning, and quick pace of play. The specific identity of the game campaign is illustrated through the prohibitions against having units that engage in mechanized assault make a conventional attack in the same turn, and perhaps most of all, in the victory conditions. The demand on the German side to minimize his casualties appears to be rooted primarily in issues of play balance, but the ability of the Poles to deny victory by leaving the game, to fight another day in another theater, is as much history as game.

Poland '39 and its siblings buck one of the most important trends in operational wargame design during the 1990's though. Operational-level games now tend to favor a greater degree of interactivity and randomness in their sequences of play. On one end of the scale, titles such as *The Legend Begins* (Rhino/Terran) and *Triumphant Fox* (Moments in History) use impulses and action phases to simulate fluidity and chaos. On the more conservative side, Vance Von Borries' *East Front Series*, *Invasion: Sicily* and *Kasserine* (all GMT) incorporate sequences of play based on the old movement-combat-perhaps more motorized movement model, but permit a non-phasing player to react to declared enemy combats prior to resolution (also used in some of the impulse-based games).

The *Command* system games totally reject this. Except perhaps to allocate defensive air support and execute retreats demanded by combat results, the non-phasing player has very little to do during his opponent's player turn.

Poland '39 is an enjoyable game, one that can be played repeatedly. In all probability, the campaign will not go in strange, improbable or surprising directions. However, the game is much more balanced than the history, without fatally compromising its simulation value, and does give a good, general view of the first campaign of World War II in Europe.