Historical Background to Smolensk 1941 – Army Group Center’s Drive toward Moscow

On June 22 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union in what would become the bloodiest struggle in the 20th century. In the ensuing war, over 6 million Germans would be killed and wounded, along with an estimated 25 million Soviets (including civilians). “Operation Barbarossa” began with the hopes that it would be a 10-week blitzkrieg campaign to destroy Russia. It turned out to take 4 bloody years and destroyed Germany instead.

“Operation Barbarossa” began with three main efforts by the German Army - Army Groups North, Center and South. Army Group North’s overall objective was Leningrad. Army Group South’s objective was to cut off and destroy Soviet forces in the Ukraine and seize Kiev. Army Group Center, which had the largest concentration of German armored and motorized forces, was to take the prize – Moscow. To seize Moscow, viewed as the strategic center of gravity of the Soviet government, would likely mean the end of the war. The historic gateway to Moscow was the strategic rail and road center of Smolensk. Smolensk turned out to be the first major operational level battle of maneuver between the Germans and the Soviets.

Army Group Center contained 44 infantry divisions, 7 motorized, 9 panzer divisions, and a cavalry division for a total of 61 divisions. Army Group Center contained PanzerGruppes 2 and 3 (later named PanzerArmees during reorganization) along with a large infantry contingent in the 4th Army and 9th Army. The two PanzerGruppes contained 9 panzer divisions, 6 motorized divisions, a cavalry division, and a few assorted brigades, and were the mobile punch of the Army Group. During the first two weeks of the war, the Soviet 10 Army was encircled and destroyed in the Minsk pocket, along with the 3rd Army and portions of the 13th Army. The Soviets were reacting in a state of panic for the most part, and the second echelon of forces developed a defensive line along the Dnepr River.

Facing Army Group Center was the Soviet Western Front. The Soviet situation on the 7th of July found them defending along the Dnepr, with elements of 13th Army holding the line from Orsha to south of Mogilev. North of Orsha, the 20th Army held the river line up to Vitebsk, while the 19th Army was at Vitebsk and to the north, with the 25th Rifle Corps in reserve. Most of the Russian divisions were reserve divisions, with shortages of men and equipment, not to mention training.

The overall front was extremely fluid at this time - Russians were straggling back to the east from the border battles through the many holes in the pockets. Despite the overall defensive nature of the situation the Soviets still managed to counterattack with the 5th and 7th Mechanized Corps toward Lepel. This counterattack, made mainly by tank forces without combined arms support, was destroyed.

The situation was not totally rosy for the Germans on the 7th of July, in that the mechanized forces of Army Group Center had totally outpaced their slower infantry counterparts and were essentially fighting alone. This meant that only 1/3 of the Army Group was facing all of the Soviet defenders, and basically had to fight an extremely fluid battle with little regard to flanks. To quote a German officer, “we asked ourselves from time to time who was encircling whom?” Still, the attack had to continue to keep pressure on the Russians and to prevent their defenses from stiffening.

In the south, the city of Mogilev had been turned into an obstacle by the mass mobilization of the populace. Mogilev was therefore encircled by PanzerGruppe 2, which crossed the Dnepr to the north and south of it with the 46th and 24th Panzer Corps, respectively. In the north, Vitebsk was seized by the Germans in a blitz attack, as some of the Russian forces were literally detRAINing there into a fight. This northern attack was the most serious for the Soviets, as the German 7th Panzer Division penetrated deep toward Smolensk from the north and threatened the entire area, to include encirclement of the 20th Army. The Germans finally took Orsha with the 17th Panzer. As a historical note, on the 13th of July the Soviets counterattacked and used, for the first time, an experimental weapon. This weapon, the dreaded “Katyusha” multiple rocket launcher, was successful enough to warrant full production, and later became one of the more famous weapons of the war.

At Smolensk, elements of the 20th Army and 16th Army were encircled to its front, but at the city itself
few troops were to be found. Just in time the 129th Infantry Division arrived to stymie the efforts of the 29th Motorized Division to seize it from the march. The 29th Motorized came from the south of Smolensk, and found the 129th Division in strong urban defensive positions, to include the critical Vodka factory. The Vodka factory was defended with vigor for obvious reasons, and vicious house to house fighting ensued.

So, by the 20th of July, the Germans had seized the southern part of Smolensk, but had not captured the city outright, and the Smolensk pocket resembled a large peninsula, as the base of the pocket was not closed. Elements of the 20th, 19th, and 16th Armies held the ever tightening pocket as the Germans brought up their foot infantry to reduce it. Meanwhile, at Yelnia, southeast of Smolensk, the Soviets were concentrating the 28th Army, a newly arrived second echelon army, in order to threaten the Germans from the south. In the north, the Soviets formed Operational Group Khomenko (essentially, 30th Army) to threaten from that direction, and also formed Operational Group Kalinin. South of Smolensk, Operational Group Kachalov was formed to attack toward the north.

Therefore, at the operational level, the Soviets were at this time assembling forces to counterattack and relieve the pressure on Smolensk, but the attacks never quite succeeded for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons was the poor state of the forces used, another was the command and control of the Soviets at this time were not up to the blitzkrieg standards of the Germans. So the Germans stabilized the situation at the Soviet attacking points, and continued the pressure on Smolensk. Soviets continued to escape the “back door” of the pocket until 3 August, when the pocket totally collapsed.

Despite the severe pounding the Soviets took during the month of July in Army Group Center’s area of operations, it cannot be seen as a total defeat. The delaying tactics, to include the occasional defeat of German units, bought enough time to ensure that Moscow would hold in the upcoming winter battles. The battles around Smolensk also took a heavy toll on German armored formations. The smashing power of the blitzkrieg finally met the endless nature of the Soviet Union’s terrain and army. Overall, the Smolensk operation can be called a German tactical victory, in that they achieved their goals and destroyed many Soviet forces doing it. However, operationally, it must be seen as a marginal Soviet success, as the Soviets bought critically needed time with the blood of the Western Front.

Designer’s Notes

When I got a chance to work with John Tiller on this game, I was extremely excited. I was a big fan of the board game “PanzerGruppe Guderian” and had always wanted to do a computer game on the subject. The computer’s strengths would allow us to do a lot of things that wouldn’t really be possible with a board game, and there was the added advantage of not having to put 12 maps up in your garage for months on end.

During the initial design analysis, we realized that the scale we wanted was something that game a tactical feel and was primarily operational in nature. So we came up with 1 kilometer hexes and 2 hours per turn, except for the two 4 hour night turns. The 1 kilometer scale was perfect for a battalion’s frontage, and the campaign map became somewhat majestic at over 300 hexes long. In fact, one of the best features of the game is the removal of what I call “edge of the world” effects……many boardgames have problems with the effect of the map sides on game play. In Smolensk, the map edges are so far removed from most of the action this is a trivial effect. The only problem remained was that of the gamer who might park units on the reinforcement hexes on the edge of the map, to unrealistically, yet effectively deny reinforcements to the Russians. So the 4 hex exclusion zone was introduced to “protect” the actual reinforcement hexes.

The actual mechanics of fire and assault evolved somewhat over time, although the basic common sense rule works best: soften up the enemy with artillery and direct fire, then assault him. At first the Germans were essentially unstoppable until we realized the assaults on broken stacks were causing far too many losses too quickly. Players may now wonder why a broken stack will sometimes survive two or three assaults, but what is really happening is that taking prisoners does take time. It takes a long time to actually process hundreds of surrendering soldiers (having done this in the Gulf, I can testify that it is more difficult than it would seem on the surface, and time consuming). In the initial tests, one armored car could overrun 1500 broken Russians and take them all prisoner, because broken units had no defense
strength. Now, broken units defend at reduced strength, but take additional losses. The effect turned out to be much, much better and more realistic overall.

Air power turned out to be nicely modeled in the game. Perhaps some of the most important pieces in the game are the German reconnaissance aircraft, which can really help put your mind at rest when you are searching for a missing Soviet mechanized corps! The Soviet airforce, while extremely minimal in the game, can still be effective if used against solitary high value units, such as German artillery. Flying them against units well protected (or in dense AA fire zones) is usually a waste of time. One of the keys to a German success in a sector is the use of recon aircraft to spot Russian artillery, then using Stukas to strike the artillery. Players may wonder where the rest of the Luftwaffe is at, and the answer is they are the forces doing the random movement interdiction against the Soviets. I decided early on we really only wanted the player directing the close support forces (essentially, the Stukas) and not be involved in interdiction and deep attacks by medium bombers. This might be fun to some folks but adds a huge amount of complexity to the game and a huge reduction in playability for not much return in realism.

Artillery, of course, is the “big killer” on the battlefield and it can make or break your attacks. In the offense, you should prioritize artillery for counterbattery, and then against the units you wish to assault. Disrupted units defensively fire at half strength so several artillery strikes against a defender can sometimes achieve this. In the defense, you usually want to use your artillery to disrupt those units that have not been disrupted previously, as disrupted units cannot close assault. If the attacker is not assaulting you, then you are holding ground and firing back, increasing his “fatigue” level and causing casualties and disrupting him.

Engineers are another key unit in the game, as they allow the Germans to build bridges over the larger uncrossable rivers, such as the Dnepr, and conversely, they allow the Russians to blow bridges. They are also useful for minefield clearing operations although very few minefields exist on the map. Those that do represent dense, preplanned fields. Local defensive minefields are actually factored into the entrenchment and improved position markers.

I’d like to make a note about the concept of “fatigue”. The word, as used in the game, does not literally mean physical fatigue, although it is a part of our “fatigue”. Rather, it is the cumulative degradation of combat effectiveness which comes over time as units take losses, lose key leaders, etc. This does not go away with just a good night’s sleep. We argued for awhile to change the term to Combat Degradation or Effectiveness, but fatigue was short and sweet, so we stayed with it for a lack of a better term. The player who pushes his units to the limit will find that they are firing at reduced effectiveness and unable to assault. It pays off to keep units organized by their divisional headquarters so as to maximize fatigue recovery, and to actually pull units out of the line from time to time to rest them and refit.

Finally, I would like to thank David Glantz for his help, although he would argue he did little, his books on the battles were by far the best and most authoritative that could be found. Additionally, I found the Sharp series on the Russians and Nafziger’s works on the Germans to be absolutely crucial in the development of the Orders of Battle. “Wig” Graves’ microfiche goldmine really made the game complete, as the 10 July task organization charts of PanzerGruppes 2 and 3 were nothing short of amazing.

**Campaign Game Notes**

**German:**

The German player actually has a difficult time here. Although he can provide almost overwhelming firepower at any given point on the map, he still has a wide assortment of victory point locations to take. Additionally, he cannot just go blindly forward and frontal assault everything in sight, as the casualties might cost him more victory points than it is worth. It is very possible to have a Pyrrhic victory as the Germans and lose by points, despite having gained all the objectives on the map. There are a LOT of Russians to deal with and more and more arrive as time goes by.

Another main point the German player must realize is that it is a BIG map….there are a lot of places to hide large formations of troops and he should not be totally oblivious to his flank security. Many times during testing a divisional headquarters would go stumbling down a “safe” road only to get obliterated by...
two or three battalions that the moving player had NO idea were there.

The German can afford to bypass some of the early objectives and strike deep, as he receives strong foot infantry reinforcements later in the game. His airpower’s prime target is to destroy the Soviet artillery units, as these are the most effective units against his attacks. Reconnaissance should also be used to try and keep track of the Soviet mechanized forces if at all possible. But given the victory point locations, it should be obvious that the main effort must be made to seize Smolensk without losing your entire armored force doing it. Tactically, the Germans have a small problem in that their infantry has a zero hex range for AT weapons (the 37mm guns in the battalions are only effective within the hex, therefore, only good in assaults or defending from assaults). The Soviets, on the other hand, have 18 45mm AT guns in each battalion, with a 1 hex range, and can actually fire at the German tanks without assaulting them. So the German player must remember this if he finds himself on the local defensive from a Soviet counterattack.

Soviet:

Playing the Soviets is definitely a challenge. Part of the initial problem is deciding who needs to “bail out” and who needs to stay in the defense of the Dnepr river line. The river line...will- fall...there is no question of that. The question is, “how long can it delay the Germans?” Several divisions in the center can and probably should pull out immediately and try to rail back to the defense of Smolensk.

As units become available, the key blocking positions in front of Smolensk should be manned and dug in. There are several large tracts of swampy terrain, and a small lake, which greatly inhibit movement. These swamps should have the few roads into them blocked. Additionally, the small town of Demidov (north of Smolensk) normally turned out to be a key location for preventing (or at least delaying) a German sweep into Smolensk from the north flank. This should probably be garrisoned.

Finally, there is the situation involving the Soviet 5th and 7th Mechanized Corps. Historically, these units counterattacked in early July and were decimated within a few days. You, however, do not have to choose to do this. Admittedly, you can probably maul a Panzer Division by attacking with them, but if you instead pull them back to a secure location and set up a Corps level ambush or two, you might get far greater use out of them. Additionally, they will constitute a mobile reserve for your Front, something fairly precious in a battle where 90% of your forces are foot infantry. If you can hold on until 13 July, when your reinforcements start arriving in large numbers, you stand a chance of winning.

Hopefully you will learn to hate the sound of rocket artillery as much as I did during testing 😃

-Gregory M. “Sturmer” Smith
HPS Simulations