

# OPERATIONAL COMBAT SERIES

## HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

### PREVIEW OF A COMING ATTRACTION

By Chip Saltsman

"Nearly 30% of the military operations of the Second World War were battles for built-up areas. A sizeable proportion of these took the form of city sieges, which proved the bloodiest of all. On the Italian front the average number of German casualties between 1943 and 1945 was 400 per week, and even on the western front it did not exceed 1000 in the same period. On the other hand, the suppression of the Warsaw uprising alone cost the German command 1250 troops a week. In Budapest the number of German defenders fell from 45,000 to 24,000 in seven weeks: in other words, every week almost 3000 German troops were lost, three times as many as on the western front, and that in addition to the Hungarian casualties. For the Soviets, the siege of Budapest also proved to be one of the most costly operations of the Second World War. In the battles for the five largest cities (Berlin, Budapest, Vienna, Stalingrad and Moscow), almost as many men and more material were lost than the British or US armies in the whole of the Second World War."—*Battle for Budapest*, Krisztian Ungvary

**Important Caveat:** *Hungarian Rhapsody* is still in development and playtesting. Unit values, special rules and victory conditions may shift from what is described in this article.

By early October 1944, only one Axis allied country remained in the war: Hungary. The Soviet steamroller eyed Budapest to the west across the Hungarian Plain. Beyond Budapest was Vienna, and for Josef Stalin the opportunity to seize as much ground as possible before the end of hostilities. Stalin also viewed Hungary's capital city as a key political prize. The Allied summit at Yalta was just three months away, and the swift seizure of Budapest and Vienna would greatly increase his bargaining power. He ordered Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, a future Soviet minister of defense and commander of the Second Ukrainian Front, which was spread throughout southeast Slovakia and north-central Hungary, to seize Budapest "in the shortest possible time — in days even". For Adolf Hitler, Budapest was vital. It was the capital of Germany's last remaining ally in

Europe and the gateway to Vienna and southern Bavaria. In addition, the Axis' only remaining crude oil plant was in southwest Hungary. Hitler believed that strong counteroffensives in Hungary coupled with a stout defense in Poland would keep the Soviets off-balance and prevent them from massing their forces against Berlin. The stage was set for the Battle of Budapest, a brutal campaign featuring the very last German offensive of the war. Not for nothing have other games covering portions of this period been called "*The Last Panzer Victory*", "*The SS Abyss*," and "*Bitter End*". No other game I know of has covered the campaign in its entirety, from the early mobile battles to the final winter slugfest.

I have been involved with playtesting the OCS game in development, *Hungarian Rhapsody*. Designer Stéphane Acquaviva has done a wonderful job researching and creating what promises to be an excellent addition to the OCS family. This is a 2-map game covering the fighting in Hungary from 5 October 1944 until 29 March 1945 (53 turns). The battlefield covers the Carpathian basin with southern Slovakia, eastern Rumania and most of Hungary. It presents both sides with real challenges.

At present, the set of scenarios being prepared are:

- Battle of Debrecen (5 October to 26 October 1944, 7 turns)
- Battle of Debrecen (1-map only, 5 October to 26 October 1944, 7 turns)
- Operation Budapest (29 October 1944 to 29 December 1944, 19 turns)
- Konrad I & II (1-map only, 1 January to 8 January 1945, 3 turns)
- Konrad III (1-map only, 19 January to 12 February 1945, 8 turns)
- Konrad Operations (1-map only, 1 January to 12 February 1945, 13 turns)
- Südwind (1-map only, 15 February to 22 February 1945, 3 turns)
- Spring Awakening to Operation Vienna (5 March to 29 March 1945, 8 turns)
- Hungarian Rhapsody Campaign Game (5 October 1944 to 29 March 1945, 53 turns)
- From Debrecen to Budapest, Half Campaign (5 October to 29 December 1944, 26 Turns)
- Konrad I & II Campaign Start (1 January to 29 March 1945, 27 turns)
- Konrad III Campaign Start (19 January to 29 March 1945, 21 turns)

The Soviet player will be operating a massive machine. Three different Fronts participated in this campaign:

- The **4th Ukrainian Front** commanded by Petrov will have the difficult mission to attack from the North through mountain passes. This Front will be committed actively in Hungary from campaign start until 12 February 1945 when most of the troops were then transferred further North.
- The **2nd Ukrainian Front** commanded by Malinovsky starts on-map and will remain the strongest and principal Front throughout the campaign.
- The **3rd Ukrainian Front** commanded by Tobulkin will arrive from the South at the start of November from Yugoslavia and fights in Hungary and in Austria with the 2nd Ukrainian Front through the end of the war.

The Soviet troops have three Tank Corps, five Mechanized Corps and three Cavalry Corps as their offensive backbone. These are represented as combined arms Multi-Unit formations with plenty of offensive heft. The core units are supported by 98 Soviet, 18 Rumanian, 6 Bulgarian and 3 Yugoslavian Infantry Divisions together with some small Czech units and Slovak Partisans. While the Soviet allied divisions are generally low quality, there are 31 Infantry Divisions with a 3-rating and 15 Infantry Divisions rated 4, therefore a significant third of the infantry is of high quality. These higher-rated Soviet Infantry Divisions include small independent SU-76 and SU-85 units which served as infantry support, as well as supporting artillery and AT units.



But the steamroller has some problems. They are operating at the very end of the Soviet logistical capability, and will have turns in which few attacks are possible. They must cross two significant rivers: the Tisza and the Danube. The Tisza is a major river which cuts across the entire map and which a capable Axis player can make a real challenge to breach. Once crossed, the Soviets come up against the Danube. The Danube presented a nightmare for the Soviet logistical system. The usual Pontoon units we use in OCS to bridge Major Rivers (like the Tisza) required huge amounts of additional material to be able to bridge the Danube (which is really large). At first, they could only provide bridges for infantry and relatively light things like trucks or artillery. Crossing the Danube with tanks was out of question until early December. Budapest has clear terrain to the east of it, but all the other directions feature difficult and defensible ground. Finally, the Germans will not go quietly.

The campaign starts in October with three principal German formations at army level:

- The **1st Panzer Army** facing the 4th Ukrainian Front to the North. This Army was "Panzer" in name only and contained mainly infantry formations. In February, 1945, many of the units will leave the map to go North.
- The **6th Army** in South Hungary and the 8th Army to the East facing the 2nd Ukrainian Front.
- The **2nd Panzer Army** (also "Panzer" as an example of wishful-thinking) starts to arrive in the campaign beginning on 1 November 1944.
- The **6th SS Panzer Army** arrives later in the campaign beginning 12 February 1945.

Many Panzer Divisions will take part in the campaign – but not at the same time. Unlike the relatively stable Soviet OB, German units experience considerable turnover depending on the situation at the other Fronts. The Germans had sixteen Panzer Divisions, four Panzer Grenadier Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions present at various points in the game. This seems huge but the actual on-map presence at any one time

is less than you want and there is also a qualitative decline – those Panzers are not what they used to be....

For infantry, the Wehrmacht fielded 28 Infantry Divisions of all types (Infantry, Jäger, Mountain, Ski), a total insufficient to face the Soviets and their allies after the massive infantry losses experienced during the summer of 1944. The German armies were also supported by some AT, Panzer, StuG and King Tiger units of good quality. A significant asset was the 15th Flak Division with its numerous 88 mm guns in an AT role. Given the lack of infantry, this division fought in the front lines like any other and provided good AT support. The Axis player will find himself using Flak units as the "brain" AR-unit defending key points. The Luftwaffe was quite strong in this theater given the presence of the prestigious JG52 squadron with its cadre of elite pilots. Tank-Buster aircraft, including famed Stuka pilot Hans-Ulrich Rudel also provide excellent support.

The Axis player must conduct that most tricky operation, an active defense. By properly exploiting defensive terrain the Axis player can obtain local superiority and do real damage. The German rapier probably can't break the Soviet sledgehammer, but can throw the Soviets off-schedule. We had one

campaign game where the Soviets lost a victory level on the last die roll of the deadline turn.

Thus far, we have found playing the German side to be harrowing, compared at various points to "Whack-A-Mole" or fending off an attack by a zombie horde. The balance-of-crises in the game is excellent. You know a game is evenly matched when you hear the two commanders exclaim (within minutes of each other):

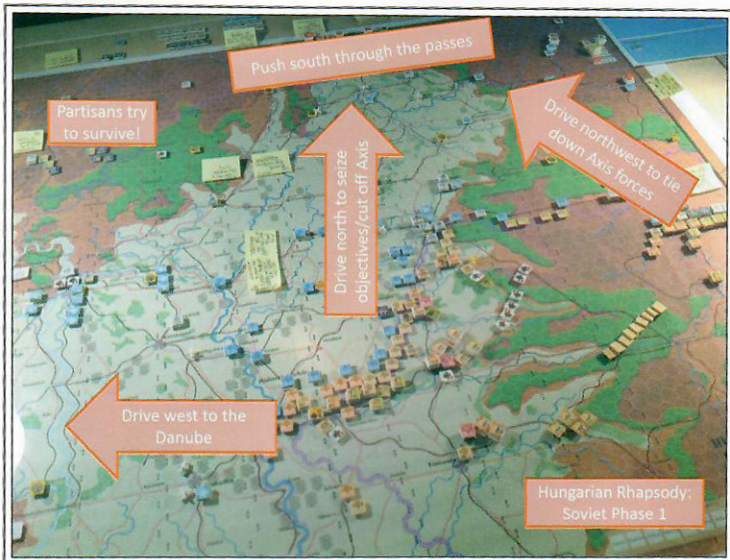
"I don't know how I can take Budapest!" – the Soviet Commander

"I don't know how I can stop you!" – the Axis Commander

The campaign generally follows four phases:

## Phase 1: October 1944

Extremely fluid situation featuring the Soviet advance into the Hungarian Plain. The Soviets are attempting to reach the Danube and cut off retreating Axis forces, but are operating at the very end of their logistical range. The Axis player has to prevent this with a mobile force that can hit hard, but not stand toe-to-toe in an open-field fight. When the campaign starts on the 5 October 1944 turn, Hungary was a priority for Stalin. Except for some minor combat against the Courland pocket, the rest of the





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Eastern Front was relatively quiet. The main problem was logistics. Attacking in Hungary was not easy because the Soviet railhead was still behind the river Dniester at this time. In October 1944, the Soviets launched an offensive without any armor or air replacements for the whole month. In addition, the amount of supply and ammunition was very low by Soviet standards.

## Phase 1 Soviet Game Tips

- Soviet players aren't used to "running on fumes" but that's the situation in this game. Only make the attacks you absolutely can't avoid making! Practice good Wagon Extender management – you have just enough to make one early on, and possibly a second later. Meanwhile, what trucks you have need to run a super-efficient shuttle operation getting supplies up to the front.
- This makes managing the road network very important, and you will quickly realize the importance of road junction locations such as Szeged, Nagyvárad and Debrecen. Don't forget that HQ units have Engineer capabilities that can bridge Major River hexsides like the Tisza. Pontoon management becomes important for the Soviets as well.
- If you can't get across the Tisza and threaten to get adjacent to the Danube in the first two turns or so, you need to flood north to seize Csap. It is very difficult to run two offensive operations diverging at 90 degrees to each other, particularly as it offers the Axis opportunities to concentrate against one of them.
- Ooze across rivers with your infantry. The Axis can't counterattack everywhere.

## Phase 1 Axis Game Tips

- Things look like a complete disaster during the first turn, but you will realize that the Soviets are very supply constrained. The Soviet Army is gasping, and sometimes all that is necessary is to get in the way. Block the roads headed towards Debrecen, particularly at choke points like Nagyvárad and other spots that hinder Soviet supply

lines along the roads. You can also use the minor rivers between the line of Debrecen-Nagyvárad and the Tisza River to delay the Soviet onrush.

- Active defense is the most difficult thing to know how/when to do in OCS! You probably want to concentrate your mobile formations . . . but where? Do they shift over to the Tisza line to swat Soviet bridgeheads? Up North to attempt a repeat of the historical battle of Debrecen? Where and when to hit back is a critical decision. You can do some real counterattacking with your Panzers, but they will slowly lose strength.
- Pay attention to where/when Soviet reinforcements enter the board. Right after the Axis reinforcements enter the East Edge on Oct 8, a mob of Soviets will be right behind them. There is also a huge set of units that enter the south map edge between the Tisza and Danube Rivers at the end of October – be ready for this.
- Do you "Hog, Supply and Hold" at B33.12 (Nagyvárad) and B26.08 (Debrecen)? Do you fight there in the plains using the river lines? You have to put up a fight here long enough to get the East Edge people to (relative) safety. Breakout anyone surrounded! Put one of your free Hogs in B17.05. Concentrate on getting your East Edge folks out, whacking bridgeheads over the Tisza, and holding the key road network hexes.
- A few more tactical considerations: The Tisza River is all about the crossings. But you really also want to look at some of the river lines that can trip up the Soviets because of their supply issues. Hexes like B28.03, B31.02 and others along the Hortobagy Minor River line can slow them down. I don't think you can prevent an eventual surrounding of Debrecen and even Nyíregyháza, but you do have the ability to counter attack at your point of choosing. The Soviets have bigtime artillery, but not really the SP to barrage with it. You can't hold a line, but you can build "Festungs" in Nagyvárad, Debrecen and

Nyíregyháza that complicate the Soviet supply as well.

- Don't keep your Panzer Divisions in the bridgehead Hogs, as this is too likely to attract air barrages. You are likely to end up with more HQ's than you need for your logistics net, so use some of them to make yourself some Engineering Capability bridges over the Tisza, too! I once got caught with my Panzer Divisions bottled up by Soviets crowding up against the bridge-holders.
- It won't seem like it now, but every infantry step is precious. You get much more Hungarian reinforcement steps than German. Whenever possible, let the Hungarians take the casualties and get the infantry steps back to the Danube/Budapest area.

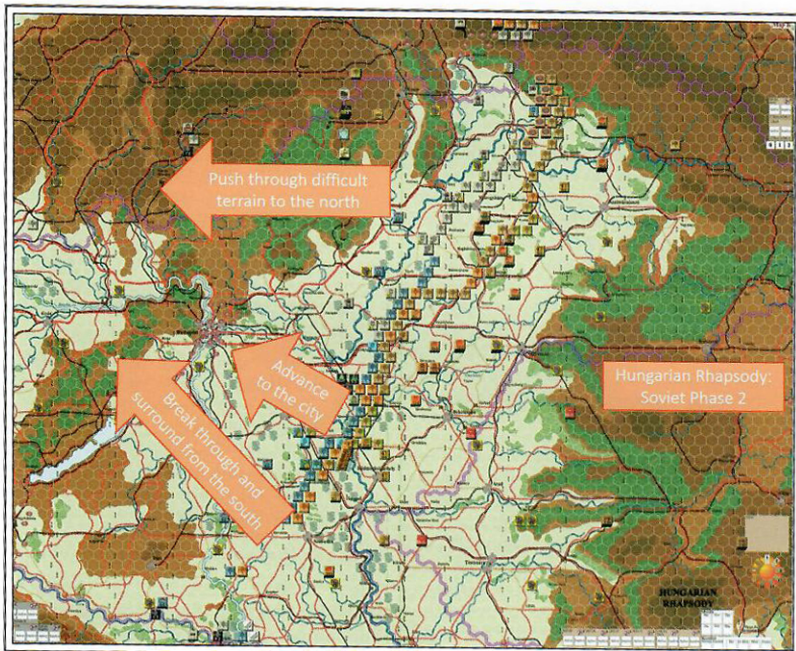
## Phase 2: November-December 1944

The Soviets attempt to invest Budapest, fighting their way through difficult terrain and fending off Axis counterthrusts. While Soviet supply remained low, tanks, guns, trucks and air replacements arrived in great numbers during these two months, allowing tremendous losses and a big push to the West. Hungary now became THE Soviet East Front priority. All assets, replacements, and supply were directed towards Hungary. The Soviet will be a Behemoth during this month.....

## Phase 2 Soviet Game Tips

- The Soviet player has great rebuild capability, starting 29 Oct 1944. The Soviets poured resources into Hungary, so you can rebuild most of your Air/Equipment losses. The infantry will slowly melt away. If a disaster occurs or if the Axis makes significant mistakes, there is always a possibility to attack Budapest directly but against a decent opponent, the Soviet player will have to surround Budapest. Historically, the Red Army commanders chose to send half of the mobile units north of Budapest and the other half south of the city. This worked out quite well despite huge losses.





## Phase 2 Axis Game Tips

- If it feels like you are fighting an ever-expanding blob monster, well, you are. The use of Artillery and Reserve markers is crucial. Each turn, try to maintain Artillery and some level 5 Action Rating mobile units in reserve in order to stop the

Soviet steamroller, especially as the Luftwaffe will not be so efficient in the November and December weather.

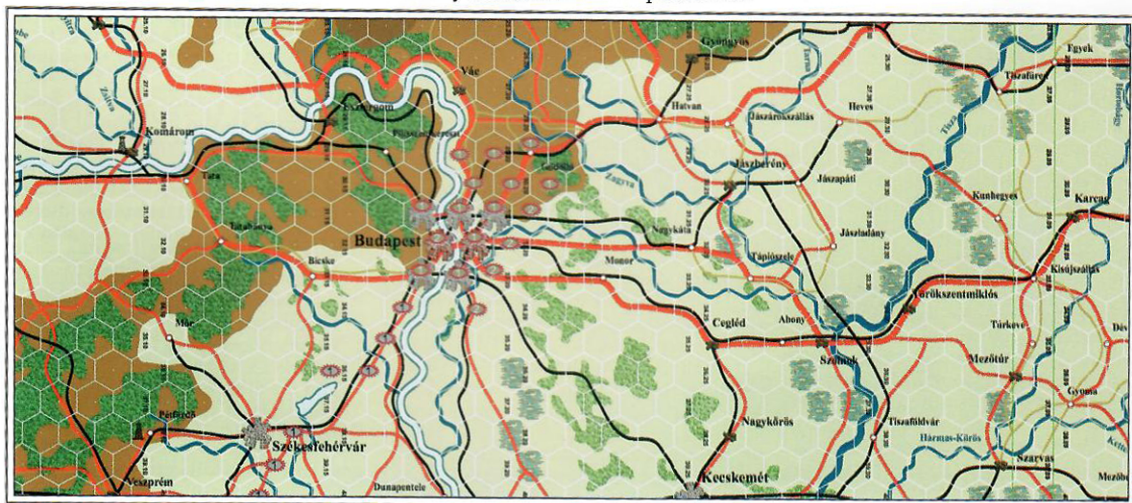
## Phase 3: January-Early February 1945

Budapest is difficult to capture and so usually becomes a 'Kessel' pocket. The

Germans try to break through the Soviet ring and to get Trace Supply to a Budapest city hex. The huge offensive against Germany will drag a lot of assets and supply away from the Soviets in Hungary which will now become a secondary theater. The campaign in Germany against Prussia and Silesia required so many resources that the Hungarian theater became the lowest priority.

## Phase 3 Soviet Game Tips

- The Soviet player will be under pressure to take Budapest by mid-February. This is very expensive in terms of supply for both the attritional barrages on the city and the actual combat. In order to reduce a target hex to favorable odds, it may be necessary to barrage it at maximum odds at every opportunity; i.e. during Barrage, Exploit and Reaction phases for 7.5 SPs! Combat may also require multiple stacks of many units; Cavalry and Tank Corps motorized brigades are particularly cost effective in this regard, along with the combat engineers for the 5 level Action Rating. On top of this, the Soviet player has to hold off the 'Konrad' relief attempts; prioritizing this will be at the expense of delaying the capture of Budapest; a real dilemma....





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## Phase 3 Axis Game Tips

- The Axis player has only limited options. Attacking through the North in terrible terrain (Hills or Wooded Hills) but knowing that it is the shortest path to Budapest or attacking by the South in clear terrain but further away from Budapest and with the Váli River en route. Regardless, the Axis should be able to shift his attacks from the North to the South or vice versa in order to deceive the Soviet and create surprise. Konrad I and II were launched in the North while Konrad III was launched in the South. This third attempt was a surprise for the Soviets so don't hesitate to do likewise.

## Phase 4: Late February-March 1945

Budapest should now have been occupied by the Soviet player. The end of February should see the Soviet player building several Hedgehogs in order to receive the last Axis offensive in Hungary while continuing limited operations in Slovakia and preparing his own offensive "Operation Vienna". The Axis should prepare for the last Hitler mandate: the Spring Awakening offensive. After the clearing of Prussia and Silesia, Hungary and the occupation of Vienna became THE priority. The Soviet last offensive against Army Group South was the most devastating of all the war...and will only stop in Vienna!

## Phase 4 Soviet Game Tips

- Having taken Budapest, the Soviet player can now relax somewhat and rebuild Corps units and accumulate supply. With the strategic focus for now further North in Germany, the limitation on supply and air activity will restrict options but consideration needs to be given to taking the objectives in Slovakia. The Hedgehogs received through the Replacement Table should be used to prepare against the final Axis offensives. If all goes well, it's a replay of Kursk, with the Soviets allowing the Axis to exhaust themselves before launching their own response. From mid-March, Hungary moves up in priority and the extra supply and air resources will allow the final Soviet offensive

to take place against an Axis now close to collapse with reduced SP and Reserve capabilities. The concealed deployment of the former elite airborne units with the new 9th Guards Army will help in this regard. The capture of the Slovak objectives, Nagykanizsa's oilfields, and an advance to Vienna via Komárom (and the western map edge north of the Danube) should now be feasible....

## Phase 4 Axis Game Tips

- The 1 SS and 2 SS Panzer Korps will arrive secretly (historically, the Soviets were able to anticipate the Wehrmacht's attacks, but not the ones spearheaded by SS units). The Axis player should decide where to attack well before the arrival of these units. The problem now is to follow the orders from Hitler, namely a huge offensive in order to secure the vital oil resources at Nagykanizsa. The Soviets will be prepared for this and will launch their own offensive. Stalin had three objectives while facing Army Group South. Occupy Budapest, grab all the industrial cities in Slovakia and make a breakthrough in order to attack Vienna. Just denying the Soviets one of them would already be an achievement.....

Commentary on special aspects of the game:

- *Practice your Hungarian* – What fun to operate on a map with place names like Sátoraljaújhely, Nyíregyháza, and Pilisszentkereszt, not to mention Kiskunfélegyháza or Hódmezővásárhely!
- *Soviet Logistical Challenges* – How to represent the Soviets at the very end of their logistical lines? This requires constraints on using railroads for trace (not possible until December), on creating Truck Extenders (not allowed, though Wagon Extenders are OK), and movement constraints for the Tank/Mech multi-unit formations because of their logistical tails.
- *Pontoons* – Due to the challenges noted above . . . these serve as an additional "governor" on the Soviet steamroller's engine.

- *Soviet Air Force* – The activity level of the Red Air Force changes throughout the game (reflected in limits on the number of aircraft that can become active each turn). From October through December, this part of the Eastern Front was where the main activity was taking place. They received priority in everything. The problem was that the logistics couldn't cope with the advance. The Red Army swarmed through Rumania and Hungary so quickly that the air forces couldn't keep up. In November and December, the logistical situation improved and the Soviet Air Force becomes extremely powerful. In January, the demand on resources for the assault against Germany pulled priority away from Hungary, consequently January and February have a very low Soviet air activity. In March, as the battles in Silesia and Prussia were over, the priority came back again to the South. Stéphane tracked the daily sorties for the Soviet air force day-by-day to figure out the right activity levels.
- *Flak Nightmare* – Designer Stéphane Acquaviva has done extensive research on the campaign. One of his discoveries was that the level of Flak defense on airbases by this point in the war made Air Barrage attacks on them suicidal. These missions did not occur to any significant extent during the campaign. Moreover, the Axis was never strong enough to do it and the Soviet doctrine didn't plan for air barrage against facilities. (Sneaky Soviet trick: use artillery to barrage Axis air bases if they are within range.)
- *Soviet Replacements/Soviet Infantry Division Recovery* – Soviet Infantry Divisions had declining manpower resources towards the end of the war but the Soviets decided to retain all divisions regardless of actual strength, because of the usefulness of their divisional artillery.
- *Heinrici Special* – The commander of the 1st Panzer Armee was a specialist in defense with a record of preparing good defensive positions in advance. Heinrici was



consistently able to mobilize rear area resources and build fortified lines well in advance of the main Soviet arrival on his front. In game play, the Headquarters assigned to 1st Panzer Armee can materialize a certain number Hedgehogs for free, generally in highly defensible locations.

- **Goulash** – This tasty Hungarian national dish becomes available as Goulash counters should Budapest become surrounded and declared a Fortress. They function very much like Tree Bark Soup or Sausages in other Eastern Front games, but with a spicy paprika flavor all their own.

Victory Conditions are extremely difficult to write. In Hungarian Rhapsody, these are usually based on geographic objectives, without reference to losses. In the longer games, the players must attempt to fulfill specific "Stalin Requests" or "Hitler Mandates". An example of a Stalin Request is "The Soviet player must make at least ONE attack against any Budapest city hexes during the month of November 1944. If not, the Soviet player suffers a Victory shift of 1 to the left." Left is bad, but this can be offset by overachieving against historical results. The playtesting and developing challenges are now:

- How do you present the players with a historically reasonable situation without forcing them to follow the campaign in a programmed way?
- How do you prevent the game from going badly off-balance over 53 turns?
- How can we do this with an appropriate number of special rules in the OCS system?

We're still at work on fine-tuning these points. In the meanwhile, have a look at the wide variety of special units to utilize in Hungarian Rhapsody.



The Soviet JS II heavy tank was equipped with a 122 mm main gun and used as a breakthrough tank. The unit featured is a Guards Tank battalion.



This Cossack counter is from a pro-German SS Cossack unit



Hungarian crew manning a 75mm PAK 40 anti-tank gun in the Budapest suburbs. The siege of Budapest took place in winter, adding to the misery of all concerned. Keeping warm was very difficult. In one sector, each Hungarian soldier in the advanced positions was allocated a dog to keep him warm.



There are several Axis cavalry units whose mobility is very useful. This photo is of the 8th SS Cavalry Division "Florian Geyer" marching through Budapest. Florian Geyer was the leader of The Black Company during the German Peasant's War. The unit was destroyed in the Budapest kessel and only 800 of its 30,000 members escaped.



II Gruppe/JG 52 was the best fighter unit in the entire Luftwaffe with aces such as Erich Hartmann, Gerhard Barkhorn and Helmut Lipfert. These pilots had between 200 and in some cases more than 300 victories and performed very well in Hungary. Pictured is a restoration of Erich Hartmann's Bf-109G



This unit is composed of Jagdpanzer V vehicles with their powerful 88mm cannon mounted on a PzKw V chassis



Katyusha was the name of a girl in a popular Soviet wartime song. The Soviet forces have plentiful and powerful artillery units, but must husband sufficient supply in order to use them.



The Soviet SU-100 was an up-gunned and up-armored SU-85 with a 100mm cannon. Masses were used to halt the German Spring Awakening offensive near Lake Balaton in March 1945. Its cannon could penetrate the front armor of a Panther tank at 1500 meters range.