

# Smolensk AAR

*By Dave Jeffery*

## Part 1

This is an AAR from a game of *Smolensk*, played over the course of a few months by myself (German player) and Alden (Soviet player).

I helped out with the early playtesting of this game, and I had strong reservations about it. It seemed to me that the "lesson" - and subtitle "Barbarossa Derailed" - were misnomers. What I saw was a German mopping up of vastly inferior Soviet forces, ended only by 1) a lack of supply and, 2) Hitler's order on "Turn 12" to send all the panzers south, in effect ending the game. At no point did the game seem of much interest to the Soviet player. It just seemed this was one where the German player had to play it through several times and would learn to maximize his moves.

Well, after one turn, the jury is still out. Alden took the Soviets and I the Germans. (No snide pro-fascist remarks, please.) But I will say that some of the innovations that were put into the design at the end stage are improvements. The initial setup in the North makes it much easier for the Germans to get to Vitebsk. The Dvina crossing for the "left hook" toward Vitebsk is now much easier. And the forces that defend Vitebsk are weaker and positioned such that the panzers can get at the city on the first turn. The Germans took the south-bank half of Vitebsk on the first turn. But, as was true of their entire first turn, they rolled the dice quite well. (Never hurts!) Two other introductions seem to be a help toward the Germans replicating their historical advance on the early turns. The Construction markers - 3 of them, used as either a bridge or air strip - enable them to bridge the Dnepr on Turn Two, as Guderian did historically. In the playtest version, this was not present. The Germans had to move an HQ up to the river, usually on Turn Two, then flip to combat mode on Turn Three. Too slow and problematic. Now, as we begin the second turn, a bridge marker will be placed somewhere at the start of the turn. Also, one side of the marker - you must choose - is an air strip. So, the Germans can use a second Construction marker for an air strip that allows fighter cover for the advance. The other introduction is the Supply Cache marker. Both sides get to roll for this each turn. Plus, they both start with two of them. For the Germans it can be used as either a 2T reduction in any artillery barrage cost or a forage to put out-of-trace units (not spearheads) back in trace. This was toyed with in the early playtest in the form of an artillery chit, but the numbers were insufficient and, per usual, artillery was never fired because the supply just wasn't there to do so. This Supply Cache is a promising development for OCS as a whole and this game in particular. It's hard to tell after just one turn, but it looks like the Germans will be able to fire their artillery a little. And we are playing this with the "Bill Stratton Artillery Rule." That is, we are allowing artillery always to fire at any column below their printed strength, to conserve supply. (The rule-as-written says only when using a Supply Cache marker.)

So, after one turn the Germans have taken Vitebsk and Hoth is threatening from the North. Guderian is on the Dnepr in the South with three panzer divisions. Mogilev will fall on the second turn. The Soviets moved up units all along the opposite bank of the Dnepr on their turn. (Also new, they only have 1/2

their movement on the first turn.) The Soviets won the initiative on Turn Two but gave it to the Germans. We don't know, yet, whether that was the right move. Traditionally, yes. Here, we don't know. Both German supply rolls were above average on the first two turns. They received 9 instead of 7 SP. Definitely a help.



Whole map at end of first turn, July 8, 1941.



Soviets were able to get units, mostly in move mode, adjacent to the potential Dnepr crossings. The Germans may take the Gross Deutschland regiment, overrun Mogilev, and use the road crossing there to advance.

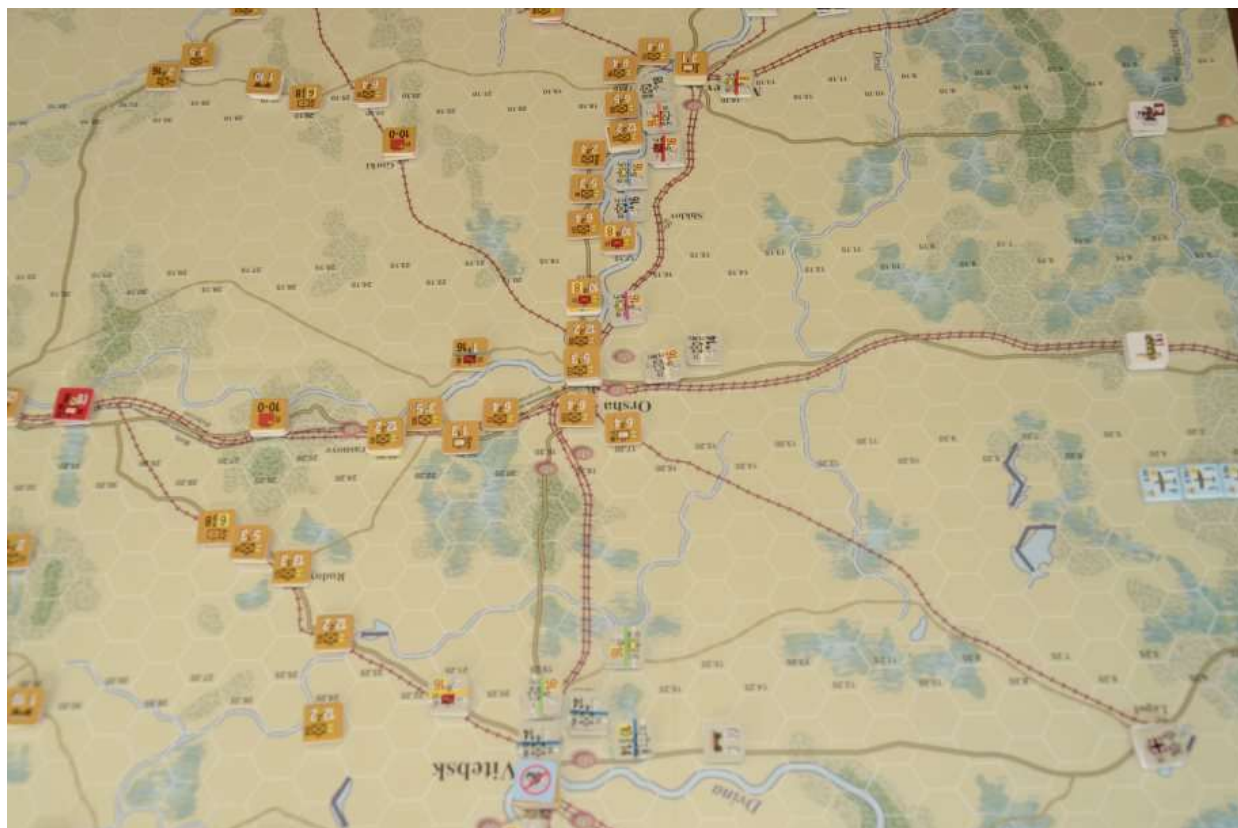


Vitbesk substantially in German hands. The only thing that saved it from being entirely in German hands was a roll of "3" on the Attrition Table that preserved the last defenders on the north side of the Dvina.



Guderian on the Dnepr.





Vitebsk down to Mogilev. For the Germans a key is getting airbases on-map. Planes flying from the off-map box spend 30 MP to get to the map edge. The Stukas only have a range of 49, so while they can refit for free in the off-map box, their 19 MP remaining in range gets them only to a line slightly east of Vitebsk and Orsha. So fairly quickly they will have to base on map, either with captured Soviet bases (Mogilev and Vitebsk?) or building strips and bases.

## Part 2

Alden and I have gotten together twice more this week for our initial play-through of *Smolensk*. We've gotten through three turns so far, through July 15. Each turn the Germans have gone first, in the second and third turns given first move by the Soviets (Alden). So far, I'd say that things are going about as expected. The Germans are at the gates of Smolensk. Vitebsk and Mogilev fell on the first turn. The Soviets continue to hold out in Orsha, but that will end on this turn, one way or the other - attrition or combat. On the second turn (July 12) the Germans got a little "frisky" and sent the 3rd Panzer roaming out southwest of Smolensk. This was, I think, a mistake. The Soviets moved a spotter next to the

division and DG'd him with air, making him useless on the third turn. It seems to me that the best use of the panzers is slow-but-steady. Don't risk getting DG'd until you are at the gates of Smolensk. The Soviets have zero ability to get out and hold the large open spaces southwest of Smolensk. Take your time and do it right. And you're going to have to use the infantry to take the city in any case. Still 9 turns before the panzers and a large part of the rest of the Wehrmacht say "goodbye." [*Auf Wiedersehen!*] Alden has put a huge stack in Smolensk.

One thing I have done with the German non-divisional units is to use them on the Orsha/Smolensk road, along with the now-arriving infantry, to prevent any Hoth/Guderian foul-up on the boundary line. So far supply hasn't been a problem, with the Germans rolling two "9's" on the first two turns, then a "3" on July 15. One thing I have noticed in the final design that is different from the playtest versions I used is that "fiddly" stuff that slowed the initial German advance has been eliminated. For example, down in the Southwest corner in the woods near Bobruysk there were several Soviet units in the initial setup. The Germans spent a lot of effort to wipe them out, having to use 1st Cavalry and others, plus supply, to open the way toward Mogilev and the Dnepr. Those units are now completely gone. Same with the "fiddly" DG-ing of part of the initial panzers, which made them non-useable on Turn One. Gone. Good streamlining in my view.

So next session will be the start of the July 19th turn.



Situation at the end of the German movement phase on the second turn, July 12.





Situation around Smolensk at the end of the third turn, July 15. Note all the German non-divisional units driving up the "border" rail line between the Hoth and Guderian groups.



Overview, end of July 15 turn. Still two Soviet units in/around Orsha. Out of supply, AR 2's. Unlikely to hold on further.



Enemy at the gates!

### Part 3

We returned to our first go-through of *Smolensk*. As it is our first playing of this, the pace is slow. But we are learning a lot.

Yesterday we only made it through half a turn, the German move on July 22. So, we are 4.5 turns in. The Germans decided to take a back-to-back on the 22nd. The previous turn had been Limited Flight, so no Hip Shoots nor every-phase air allowed. The 22nd had Normal Flight. The Soviets had pushed large forces into Smolensk on July 19, the result of the retreat from Orsha plus the reinforcements coming up the Moscow Highway from the East. The Germans had cut off Smolensk on the July 19 turn, but most of the encircling forces were in move mode. They decided to take the double on July 22 to tighten the pocket and get everyone into combat mode, plus take advantage of some opportunities to the northeast. On neither turn did they do much combat, instead maneuvering the mobile forces into position. Also, while mostly not there yet, they have their infantry divisions arriving into the battle now.

The Soviets have difficult choices to make as to where to defend strongly and, if not on the beaten path, how to get their forces there. Until August 1 they cannot use Strat Mode (although given the panzers roaming around, not sure they would want to do that anyway). So, as you'll see in the photos, on July 19

they left a substantial hole in their lines to the northeast of Smolensk. This is very difficult terrain to defend. No rail lines to the area and no primary roads. In the exploit phase of July 22, the Germans sent three of Hoth's panzers, 7th, 19th and 20th, into that "wilderness" and occupied three objective hexes, Zhakoyskyy (40.31), Bel'yy (46.29), and Pusii (48.28). I think Alden and I would agree in retrospect that the Soviets need to always keep at least one unit in all objective hexes to keep this from happening.

Around Smolensk the Germans have a quite-tight noose. The Soviets have an abundance of supply cache markers from good rolls, so radiating out from Smolensk itself they will be able to keep the large surrounded mass in trace supply for one turn. And then, I think, there is enough supply in the city to keep much of the group from suffering attrition for a good number of turns. But there are also several small separate pockets within the large Smolensk pocket that can't be reached by the HQ. They will either need to roll for breakout or suffer attrition.

So what lessons have we possibly learned after 4.5 turns? All subject to change upon further play, of course.

1) After 4 turns the Germans are still okay on supply. We are playing with the random rule from the start, where the Germans get an extra 2 SP on a roll of 5 through 9. This has only worked twice, the other two times the Germans were penalized the use of specific aircraft, off on other missions. But the Germans have been emphasizing logistics from the beginning. They currently have one wagon extender deployed and two truck extenders. Next turn they will be able to collapse one truck extender and replace him with a wagon extender, moving the truck forward. They have used their two RR units to convert on the "Orsha Line," and will reach that city next turn on their way to Smolensk.

2) The German player needs to be certain to take his time. There are a lot of turns before he loses most of his forces to withdrawal on August 19 - 12 turns of guaranteed good weather. An eternity in OCS time. It looks to us like they should not gamble with sending a recon or two roaring deep to take a key hex. They will likely get squashed, easily. But if you move forward, slowly, a full panzer division, he will not be messed with.

3) On the first turn or two the Germans will have to attack and spend supply. No way around that. But after that, not so much. Conserve supply and win by maneuver. The Soviets are woeful in their lack of mobility. And minimal rail capacity. The Germans, if they take their time, can mostly beat them to any "spot."

4) So far, we do not see how the Soviets "derail" the Blitzkrieg by attacking. If the German is careful, his panzers are never caught in move mode near large Soviet forces that can do them harm. And when the German infantry catches up (patience, patience) how are the Soviets, with only 1 AR4 in the entire game I believe, supposed to take on 20-4-3 German infantry or a bunch of 6-5-8 panzer battalions, backed up by some Luftwaffe reaction strikes to "derail" any attacks?

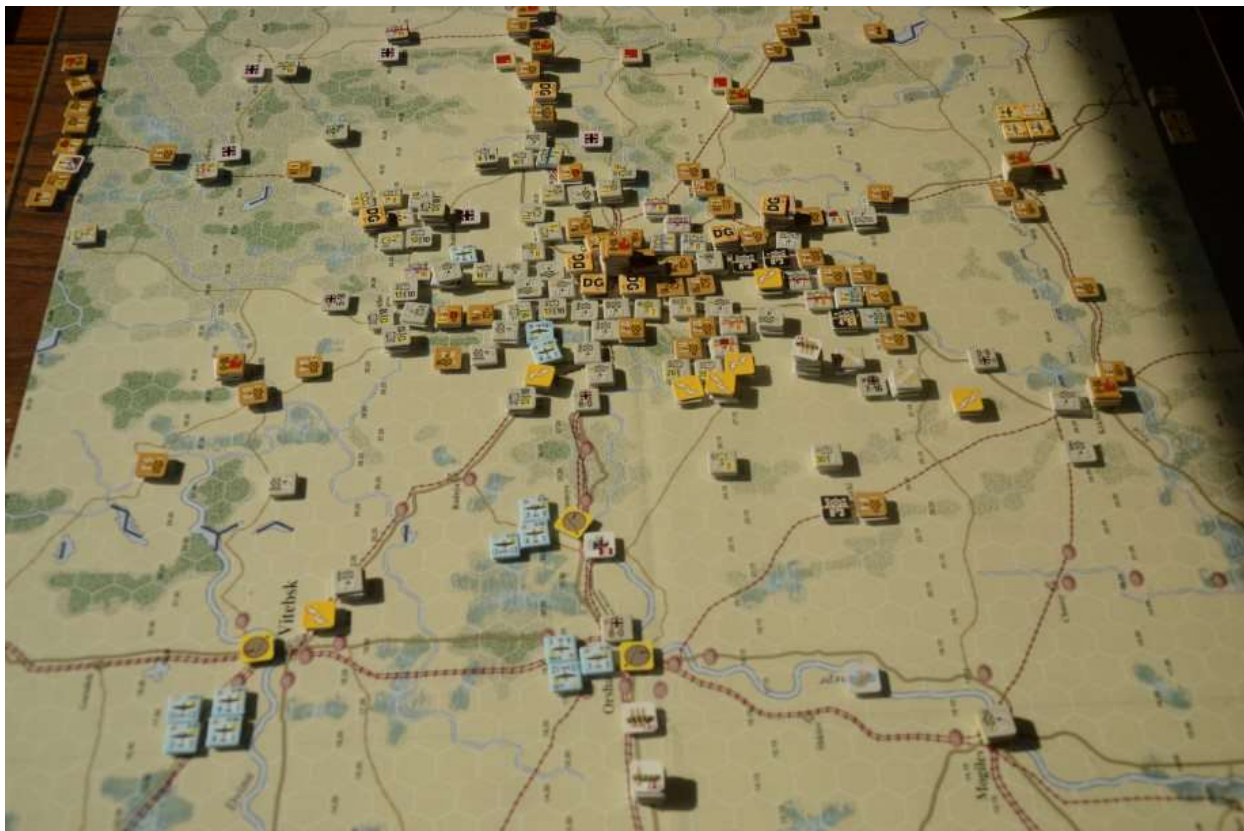
5) We are not certain yet, but it seems to us that the Soviets need to put up more of a fight for the Orsha/Smolensk Highway than Alden did this time. Orsha held out until Turn 3 because the Germans decided to starve them out rather than spend supply to fight into a minor city. However, the swift Germans just went around the city for those turns. The Soviets might be able to make this tougher by erecting three "Murphy Bumps" on the three highway hexes with printed hedgehogs, 22.29, 24.19 and 26.19. One swamp and two forest hexes. Put a couple of 12-2-2s in there with some supply and they



might be able to delay the German advance for two or three turns, particularly the swamp hex. (Our gaming group named these “Murphy Bumps” after Alan Murphy, who frequently uses this tactic.)

6) So far, the Germans have only used one of their three construction markers, to put a bridge over the center Dnepr on Turn Two. Otherwise they have been able to capture Soviet airbases to avoid building more of their own, although they did construct an actual airbase within range of Smolensk.

7) The supply cache markers seem to be working well, especially to bring artillery fire somewhat back into the system. The Germans have used theirs on each turn to fire one artillery unit, usually augmenting the "2T free" with a token or two to up the barrage level. The problem still exists, OCS-wide (18 independent German artillery units in *Smolensk*, 90% of which will never fire in this game, even with the supply cache) but perhaps the supply cache rule is the basis for a wider solution.



The map in the middle of the July 22 turn. Soviets to move.





Three of Hoth's panzer divisions have seized three objective hexes during the July 22 exploit phase.



The Smolensk Pocket looking from the West. Note there are three "other" smaller pockets to the northwest, west and southeast of Smolensk that can't be reached by the Smolensk HQ using a supply cache. (Also, one out-of-picture to the northeast.) Either breakout or attrition seem the choices.



This is the area south of Smolensk. The Germans have bridged the Sozh River further south and sent the Lehr battalion and the cavalry division (top right) to cut off a road and rail line into Smolensk. Conserving supply, the Germans do not fuel every panzer division every turn as the game goes on. Note, above, 10th Panzer is just staying in place this turn.







This is the area immediately east of Smolensk, leading to Vyazma. The 900th Lehr Brigade has taken Yartsevo, 41.22, an objective hex.

#### Part 4

Alden and I continued plodding along on our first run-through of *Smolensk* this past Sunday. We got through just one turn this session, our norm.

When last we reported, the Germans had taken a double turn on July 19/22 and had lept forward to great gains, taking five of the required six objective hexes and surrounding a stoutly-defended Smolensk. So, when the opportunity arose, Alden took a double for the Soviets over July 22/26 in an attempt to break the encirclement of the key city. He had, it is now revealed, 18 SP stockpiled in Smolensk. He used some of that, as well as supply (and units, of course) outside the pocket to attempt to establish trace into Smolensk. He used something like five Supply Caches to fire artillery at less cost and, perhaps most importantly, keep the pocket in supply for another turn. His artillery fire was true. I believe we counted 8 German hexes DG'd, including key stacks that were astride the rail line from Roslavl to Smolensk. Then he attacked. But the Germans had put some very powerful stacks of full panzers in the key hexes. And... he rolled terribly! So, at the end of his July 26 turn the encirclement was still in place. A good portion of the 18 SP in Smolensk had been expended.



On their July 26 turn the Germans spent most of it on "administrative stuff." They rolled well for supply and received 11 SP (average at this time of the game is 7 SP). Their two RR units converted through Orsha. And the infantry divisions finally began arriving at the front. They were able to move into the key encirclement hexes and strengthen them considerably. Several overruns were made on hexes with weak defenders surrounding Smolensk so that German forces were, for the first time, adjacent to both north and south hexes of the city. Of course, now that the dog has caught the car, what does he do with it?

On July 29 the Soviets won the initiative roll. At first, Alden was inclined to pass the turn to the Germans. But as we looked at the map, I pointed out that the "rescuing" forces outside of the Smolensk pocket were not in a good position. They clearly were not going to be able to break into the city. But if they stayed where they were, there was a good chance that the Germans were going to make a double envelopment and trap those forces, too. That would likely end the game. So, the Soviets moved first and began withdrawing eastward to more defensible positions.

The Germans are still in very good shape. The Luftwaffe has been attrited quite a bit by flak. And on August 1 they have major Luftwaffe withdrawals. But there are still 6 turns to go until the panzers and others go away. (The set turn of August 19, known to all, has a profound effect on play. Even small things. Last turn the Germans rolled well on the variable table, got 2 Pax and an EQ. Well, they checked the August 19 withdrawal and chose to rebuild a panzer battalion and infantry regiment of one of the two panzer divisions that aren't withdrawn. Shame!) The question the Germans have now is do they assault Smolensk? Or do they let it wither on the vine and attrite? Or a combination? And neither side has a feel just yet for what the massive August 19 withdrawals mean for the play.



View from the South, at the start of German July 29 turn. Soviets have pulled back from contact with the encircling Germans.



You can see the German infantry has arrived at Smolensk.



Roslavl, an objective hex, is still in Soviet hands. The Germans may use one of their two remaining counters to bridge the river and come around to the South. But that is not at all clear.





The Smolensk/Vyazma/Moscow highway. Hoth's panzers have taken five objective hexes in their area. But the most advanced (under Reserve marker) has trouble staying in trace. It would seem that they want infantry to take over the occupation duty, freeing them up. But how much further east should they go?

## Part 5

Alden and I got together last Sunday for more of our *Smolensk* game. We only managed a half turn (but had some fine beer!) in the session, the German move in the bottom of July 29.

As you may recall, the Germans have backed all their mobile forces away from Smolensk. The thinking right now is that they will allow the city to wither on the vine, as rescue efforts can no longer be effective. The cordon is too strong. Mostly now given over to the newly-arrived infantry divisions. The German panzers, both Hoth and Guderian, are now easing away (mostly) from the Smolensk/Moscow highway. They are leaving that to infantry and non-divisionals so they don't have to worry about territorial impingements. In Hoth's sector the panzers are now moving off the objective hexes to the north which they captured early in the game. A transition is being made to infantry garrisons so there won't be panic when the panzers go South on August 19. Guderian's forces expended the second of three bridge/airstrip markers to cross the river west of Roslavl. (In this first play-through it seems to us that the



Germans capture enough Soviet airbases that they don't have to worry about creating forward airstrips with the markers. Getting across key river points is more important.) Two panzer divisions and the cavalry division have now moved in Exploit to cut off Roslavl from trace supply. But not particularly tightly. So, we will see there.

The Germans won the die roll for August 1. They gave first move to the Soviets, when we resume Sunday. August 1 is a watershed for the Soviets as they are now allowed to build hedgehogs and use Strat movement. Whether this comes too late to be of effective use remains to be seen. And there are now five turns remaining before the massive German (and some Soviet) withdrawals of August 19. Both Alden and I are very curious to see how the game plays from that point forward. We sort of have the feeling it will be very weird.



Looking East at Smolensk and Roslavl. The airbase hex where the Bf 109 is was captured by the Germans this turn. It is also an objective hex.



This is east of Smolensk, looking toward Vyazma. The Germans are mobbing the central rail line.



All the main areas of activity as the Soviets prepare to move on the top of August 1.





Roslavl in detail. The rail and road lines south to trace at Entry D have been severed. But the path to the east is not fully blocked if the Soviets are willing to sacrifice some "carpet boys." Also, there is likely a fair amount of supply in Roslavl itself.



Smolensk. As you can see, the German infantry have taken over the siege. At one time supply was plentiful in the city. But much was used two turns ago to fire artillery and do some attacks in an attempt to break the encirclement that failed.

## Part 6

Alden and I got together on Sunday to continue our *Smolensk* game. We are now in the bottom half of August 5, with the Germans about to move when we resume.

The game has reached a very interesting point. With the advantage of foreknowledge that all gamers possess, the Germans know that they have four more turns to make progress before almost all their striking power heads away. This is certainly an advantage that Hoth and Guderian did not possess! (Can you imagine what it must have been like for them when the order came down "Disengage. Take your panzers to Kiev!" They must have gone crazy.) As the front has narrowed somewhat to the "axis" of the Smolensk/Moscow highway/railroad the Soviet resistance has stiffened considerably. Alden has built hedgehogs in several spots and has piled troops along the road.

So here is the current thinking, with which Alden and I have had open conversations as we attempt to figure out lessons-learned and best strategies after this first-time-through. Right now, the Germans have secured the six objective hexes they require for "victory." They are also threatening four others of the



11. Yeln'ya, Roslavl, Safonovo and Dorogobyzh. The first two may fall. The other two, not cut off and heavily defended, less likely.

Smolensk is still in Soviet hands, at least the northern hex. The southern Smolensk hex fell to the Germans on August 1. That hex was out of supply and Alden rolled poorly on the Attrition Table, eliminating 4 steps. The Germans overran the lone defender to take the hex. Smolensk, of course, is a requirement for German victory. To date there has not been a single attack on Smolensk. Alden had heavily supplied it. When the Germans surrounded the city, the Soviets expended quite a bit of supply in an attempt to re-establish trace by attacking out and firing some artillery in the city. This appears, we think, to have been a mistake. Once trace is lost, hunker down and forget re-establishing it. So that SP is missed for on-map use. On the other hand, there is an AR 4 NKVD unit in the city, so it is possible that once the last supply is exhausted the Soviets could hold out for a while. Given that, the Germans will likely marshal a bunch of 20-4-3 infantry divisions and begin attacking this turn. It may take two turns, but the city should fall. And priority - and supply, which is not too bad - will be given to that.

The Germans are also looking ahead to the August 19 withdrawals, trying to fathom what the environment will then look like. Most noticeable is that they must withdraw 10 trucks and 4 wagons. This is a lot! So, they are looking at how they are going to be able to supply their flanks - and the outlying objective hexes - as the extenders may all have to go away! It might be quite challenging. They have already lost most of their Luftwaffe tactical planes to withdrawals on July 29 and August 1. Very little strength left.



This is everything. Germans about to move at end of August 5.



Looking north-to-south on the Smolensk-to-Vyazma line. Note the four hedgehogs built by the Soviets. For the most part the Germans decided to keep Hoth and Guderian away from the boundary line which they can't cross. But as Hoth's panzers seized the northern objective hexes they then have moved south and must watch the line.







Looking north-to-south. That is a surrounded Roslavl at the top of the photo, under the hedgehog. Probably a lot of supply in there. The DG'd counter to the left is 3rd Panzer. They dashed out there in the German Reaction Phase on August 5. DG'd by Soviet artillery. They have cut off the rail line into Yeln'ya (under the hedgehog). And that is an objective hex.



Smolensk. As you can see, currently surrounded by minimal breakdowns for the most part. This turn that will likely change and attacks will begin. Germans have converted the rail all the way up to where the Strat Mode unit to the right is.



Soviet losses. They look to be substantial. And we think they are but aren't sure. Some Breakout returns on the "wheel."

## Part 7

Alden and I have kept plugging away at our game of *Smolensk*. We had a session on Sunday and got to the bottom of the August 8 turn, with the Germans about to move.

The biggest event of the day was the fall of Smolensk. That happened on the August 5 turn. The Germans realized that time was running short. Waiting to starve out the Soviets just wasn't going to work. They still had a little bit of supply left (turns out it was 2T), plus they had the rare AR 4 NKVD unit in the hex to give a decent chance on all attrition rolls. On August 19 the bulk of the German armor goes away, plus a lot of other independents and five infantry divisions. So, they decided to pay the SP cost and attack Smolensk. First, they DG'd the hex with a Hip Shoot. First try, too. (Smolensk is extremely close city terrain, so there are two left shifts. But density brought it back to "no change.") Then they attempted an overrun with a full strength 20-4-3 infantry division. That got a result of AL1o1/Do1. They took the two-step loss, thus forcing the Soviets to kill the NKVD AR-lead. (Unlike EATG/Case Blue there is no requirement that the NKVD border units be the last loss in the hex.) Another infantry division plus AG regular attack with an AR5 lead achieved surprise and inflicted a twostep loss on the defenders. All that remained was a DG'd 12-2-2. Elements of 18th Panzer hit the city with an overrun, achieved surprise and a DL1o1 result finished off the defenders. On August 5 Smolensk

fell. But it cost 5 SP, with combat and fueling. And for the past two turns the Germans have rolled below average on the supply table, plus failed to get the 2 SP of "bonus" supply as well. So, they are very tight on available supply, to the point where nothing offensive happened on Hoth's side of the dividing line last turn.

On the same turn the Germans spent more supply and went after Yeln'ya, to the southeast. Yeln'ya is one of the objective hexes. Here they got a bit lucky and got a 5-column Surprise shift. Yeln'ya fell.

During their August 8 turn the Soviets fell back to a pretty solid defensive line. While not in disarray by any means, they don't have much left - if they ever had any - of quality units. The kinds of reinforcements they have been receiving are 12-1-2 Militia divisions and the like. The Germans, with the taking of Smolensk, now have the required city objective hexes under their control, plus seven of the other objectives. For "victory" they only require six of the latter. So right now, except for surrounded Roslavl, they are focusing on protecting what they have and concentrating on what they will lose on August 19. As Alden said, were it not for that looming date he would have resigned the game at this point. But we want to see what happens when the Germans lose all their motorized divisions and all but two of their panzer divisions (7 and 10th remain, one from Hoth, the other from Guderian). Even though this is our first time through the game, we can see a certain amount of something close to gameiness is creeping in. Unavoidable. The Germans know exactly how many turns of full-force they have left and who will depart and act accordingly. Same with the Soviets. Supply permitting, we think there may be a huge amount of panzer attacks with the departing units, just before the deadline. (Wisely, there is a rule that prevents use of internals for this kind of thing; at least without paying for it all from future supply allocations.)

Still, pretty interesting. Frankly, better than I expected to this point.





The entire front, middle of the August 8 turn.



Roslavl under siege. It is an objective target.



Looking eastward down the Moscow highway. The Soviets have piled units in and built hedgehogs. To the right under the Balkenkreuz is Yeln'ya, an objective hex captured by the Germans on August 5.



Smolensk under German control. That 5-factor truck next to the city will depart on August 19, along with another 5 factors of trucks, leaving the Germans unable to form truck extenders. Thus, trace supply on the fringes will be challenging. Plus, all 5 Panzer HQs also depart. But this turn the rail conversion will go through Smolensk, then further east and south. So likely that infantry HQs, or which many will remain, can throw trace out from railheads to the fringes.

## Part 8

With Comrade Alden idled by the government shutdown there has been plenty of opportunity for us to get together to play our first go-through of *Smolensk*. However, it appears that we have approached the end of this game. As we broke up yesterday Alden was of the opinion that he was going to resign.



Here's what happened: By the rules of the game, when we reached the August 19 turn it had become a sudden death victory for the Germans. They had taken 8 of the 11 victory hexes, which is enough for the sudden death victory. However, both Alden and I wanted to see what the post-August 19 landscape looked like, so we decided to push on. (To refresh, August 19, 13 turns into the campaign game, is when virtually the entire German army goes away, south to Kiev. Poof! Only two panzer divisions and one motorized are left behind. All the rest, plus 6 infantry divisions, many wagons and trucks, many independents, all Panzer HQs, substantial Luftwaffe assets, all are gone.) With the foreknowledge that all gamers have (We wondered if a variable withdrawal of a turn or two either way would reduce the gameiness?), the Germans began to prepare for the withdrawals several turns ahead. Things like extenders that were going to vanish were brought in. Trace supply was adjusted accordingly. We then discovered that it mattered quite a bit who went first on August 19 - the Soviets, too, have substantial withdrawals but, a-hem, most of them can be satisfied by taking out of the Dead Pool. So, the Germans won the die roll and gave the turn to the Soviets. They sat there, not doing much, because they knew any counterattack against the departing units was a waste. In the German August 19 Reaction they made pretty good use of the departing units that were in Reserve, using them for overruns and the like. But, a good rule, they must expend actual supply. They can't go Low without paying to re-ammo in the future. Anyway, Alden and I were quite startled when we lined up all of the departing German units. Wow!

The greatly diminished Germans, holding 8 victory hexes plus Smolensk, Mogilev and Orsha - enough for a "conventional" victory as well, won the August 22 initiative roll and gave first move to the Soviets. Alden decided to attempt to pick off the northern victory hexes, in the former "Hoth zone." This was a good choice. There are three of these hexes up there. The terrain is heavily forest and woods. No good roads and no rail access. So hard for the Germans to react. The Soviets have the additional advantage of coming in from the North off-map box, in trace, to do damage. The Germans on August 19 had abandoned their most forward victory hex, Pusii. Just too hard to hold. The Soviets then approached Bely'y, with further sights on Zharkoyskyy. Bely'y was going to be pretty easy to cut off from tenuous trace. Elsewhere the Soviets moved up to be adjacent to the Germans and used their substantial SP reserves to barrage key hexes on the German line, DG'ing three hexes. At first glance it looked like the Germans were about to collapse. And this is why we had continued, to see what the post-August 19 game looked like.

However, German collapse was not to be. As is almost always the case in early East Front games, the Germans, even when diminished, are ever-dangerous with their mobility and vastly superior action ratings. On their half of August 22 the Germans, down to very little on-map supply and their average SP roll netting them a mere 3, struck at two of the remaining three Soviet-controlled victory objectives. More importantly, they took three hexes where the Soviets had SP. Two of them were -shame - ungarrisoned!!! The net result was a loss of 7 SP by the Soviets, even though the Germans got unlucky and only captured 6 tokens of the 28 seized. In

the south the 10th Panzer surrounded seven rifle divisions east of Roslavl. They sent the 10th's recon racing behind the Soviet lines down there to capture two supply hexes. The Soviets have no strength left, that sector now in total collapse. Spas Demyansk, a victory objective, is within reach should the Germans move first on August 26. In the center the Germans spent 5 tokens and took out a 4-3-6 unit, with supply under it, to cross a key river and surround Dorogobyzh (46.17), another victory hex. It is a small pocket and the Soviets have a supply cache left, so they could supply the pocket for the next turn. But they have little strength left in that area, too, to counter the 20-4-3 German infantry divisions, nor the nearby 7th Panzer. In the north the Germans broke down several 20-4-3's and formed a weak line of 4-4-3's to keep the advance from Pusii from moving free of cost.

All-in-all this does feel like the end of this game.



This is the pocket formed by 10th Panzer and friends, east of Roslavl, on August 22. The 2T at the top of the picture is German controlled after the 10th's recon ran through the hex in Exploit.



The whole meaningful part of the map. In the north (left) the Germans have made a makeshift line to keep Bely'y from being cut off by the advancing Soviets. In the center, along the Smolensk/Moscow highway, the side-by-side hedgehogs are Soviet-built, but taken by the Germans three turns ago. They anchor the German center line. In the south you can see the precarious position of the Soviets. Most of their units are cut off. Breakout is an option, but with five turns left...



The north.





The pocketing of Dorogobyzh. A supply cache is available to keep them alive for a turn. But note the weakness of the defense to the southeast. There is no one there!

## Conclusions

This AAR was based on just a single, first-time-through play. So, it is entirely possible that some nuances were missed or fundamental errors made, although the latter is unlikely. Both Alden and I are long-time, experienced players of OCS who know the system well. And being involved in the early playtesting of the design also gave me some insight as to where the game was, and where it ended up. There were some major changes made to the design that significantly enhanced play. Most of those are mentioned in the AAR, above.

First, some general comments about the game. It has many plusses. The campaign game is only 19 turns long. And it is a one-mapper. That makes it excellent for setting up FTF if you have limited space. And it can be played relatively quickly - for an OCS game! Good map and counters with compact game-specific rules. An enjoyable, playable OCS game for experienced players or newbies. You can play a turn or two, discover that you did something egregiously wrong, and re-set with ease. Unlike, say, a monster like *Case Blue* or *Beyond the Rhine*. While the game is enjoyable for both sides, make no mistake that the Soviet player needs to recognize they must play defense, and only defense. You will never get much of a chance for "revenge" in this one, unlike the monster East Front games. The German player needs to realize that it is all offense for him, but with restraints provided not by the Soviets, but by tight supply and the

looming withdrawals, culminating on the massive departures of August 19. The most interesting special rule in the game is the introduction of the "Supply Cache," which is taken from the now-optional 21.10 series rules. It is mandatory in *Smolensk*. Use of a Supply Cache marker - both sides have some at start and can get more through variable rolls - enables the user to either fire an artillery unit at a 2T deduction in cost or provide forage, through an HQ, for units out of trace. The Germans in *Smolensk* are only interested in the artillery reduction application. Does it work? A little. If the Luftwaffe is grounded or misses you can use a Supply Cache to fire a panzer artillery for only a token. Is it a long-term solution to the virtually complete erosion of artillery use in OCS? Definitely not. In *Smolensk* the Germans have about 18 independent artillery units. In our game I think one of them fired, once. That's it. So the artillery units are continually used as carpeting for supply paths or shell catchers for successful Soviet barrages. Given the brevity of *Smolensk* it is not a major problem, unlike the monster games. But those 18 artillery counters are in the game to no historically useful purpose.

### The Germans

The German player needs to proceed with a constant eye on the August 19 massive withdrawal. For him, the campaign game is, effectively, only 13 turns long. So he must keep an eye on the objective hexes and the knowledge that post-August 19 some of the objective hexes he captures might be very hard to hold until game's end. For example, Pusii (48.25) is hard to get to, hard to keep in trace, and hard to hold until the end as the Soviets try to reclaim it. In general, Hoth's objective hexes in the north are in difficult terrain and, when taken, will require artfully placed HQs to keep them in trace.

Supply is the difficult factor for the Germans throughout the game. There is no way he will be able to move all his panzers every turn. In fact, moving half of them, on average, will be good. So use the one SP of fuel wisely. Fuel a division in Reaction to get maximum movement out of it. Have a plan. Don't separate the panzer's component units and send them willy-nilly forward. The Soviets can and will kill those kinds of forward units. But a panzer division in a single hex? Untouchable by the *Smolensk* Soviets. That said, note that the panzers are not well-suited to take the city hexes on the map. Smolensk especially, but also Orsha, Mogilev and Vitebsk. To the extent possible, leave that to the superb 20-4-3 infantry divisions (there is even one fine AR 5 division, the 78th) or at least the infantry components of the motorized divisions. And as much as possible, keep Hoth and Guderian away from the dividing line. Let their panzers mostly operate well north and south of the line. Let the heavy lifting along the Orsha/Moscow highway be done by the many non-divisionals and the infantry. Save supply for the big assault on Smolensk. That has to be done with the infantry, perhaps with an AR 5 assault gun thrown in for the surprise rolls. But you will need a full turn's worth of supply, at least, to take a well-defended and supplied Smolensk.

### The Soviets

The first thing the Soviet player needs to realize is that he will get the stuffing knocked out of him for most of the game. No getting around that. But how artfully he allows himself to be pummeled will be the key to how he does. His best units are AR 3's. The Germans look at that

and laugh. Virtually every one of their units is above that ranking. And the inability to build hedgehogs nor move in strat mode for the first seven turns of the campaign is very restrictive. What does he have on his side? Terrain and supply. Much of the terrain on the map, particularly in Hoth's northern sector, is not conducive to mobile operations. Look for swamp that the panzers can't enter. There is a small circle east of Orsha and a key three-hex "line" around 31.20 west of Smolensk. Hexes like that. There are also some on-map hedgehogs that can make for a more difficult attack by the Germans, increasing an AR3 to an AR 4, frequently in hexes that do not double the attacking panzers. Also, the Soviet player needs to learn and use the off-map boxes. His army is dreadfully immobile. But those unique boxes provide a way to both get units in trouble off the map and to bring them back in at a great distance away, often causing the Germans trouble. Take the time to master those rules.

Supply is another Soviet advantage. They get more supply than the Germans, on average. And, unlike the Germans, they have so few mobile forces that they spend very little for fueling. Use the supply advantage in two ways: Build stockpiles in major crunch points to stack with units so they can survive the German advance, at least for while, and cause them discomfit. This is particularly important in Smolensk. In our game, above, Alden had, I think, 18 SP in Smolensk in late July. He made the mistake, in hindsight, of using a lot of that to barrage and attack out of the city in a futile attempt to reopen supply lines. No. Had he kept the supply in there, the large stack of defenders might have held out forever. Force the Germans to attack with dear supply while spending only 2T on defense and perhaps another 6T for on-map supply. That gets you six or seven turns of survival, a long time. Also use your supply advantage to fire the Soviet artillery. Unlike the Germans, you can do this. And to good effect. A DG'd panzer division can't move optimally, can't overrun, and is greatly reduced in effectiveness.

Lastly, keep an eye on the objective hexes. You know the German is. You can't hold them all but you can make taking some of them very costly. Force the Germans to spread out. Make certain you have at least someone in every hex, with a little supply. Don't allow the Germans to take any of them for "free." That will mean he'll be able to concentrate his forces on the remaining ones. Hang on for dear life and wait for August 19 to roll around. Things will then be much better!