



The Third Winter, Campaign Game AAR

by Chip Saltsman

Our regular gaming group played the entire Third Winter campaign game to a conclusion during 2021-2022. Here is a record of the game and some of our observations.

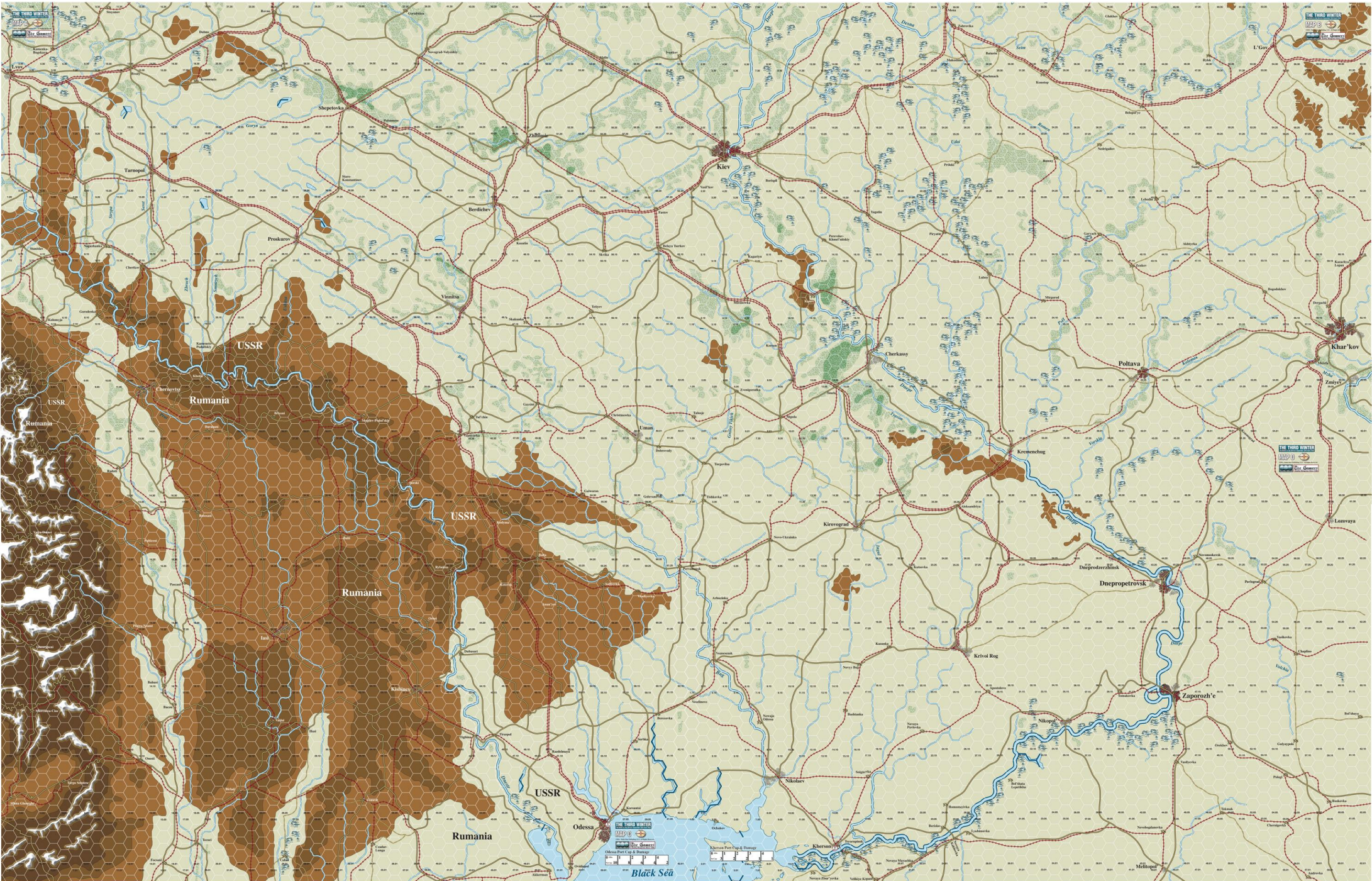
Right off the bat, this game is huge. There are 27 Axis Multi-Unit Formations (plus some allied and optional ones), and 37 Soviet. It covers the massive battles in what the Soviets called “right bank Ukraine” from the Dnepr River west to Poland, Bessarabia and Rumania. The entire campaign lasts some 60 turns (it has a variable ending date. It allows both sides to attack, counterattack, deceive, and recover from disasters. Players can map out a grand strategy and see it through to fruition (or changed it several times).

In a weird parallel, most of the events in the current War in Ukraine were simultaneously occurring on places represented on the Third Winter map. We didn’t need any help finding Kherson, Mariupol and other locations which were in the news every day.

Our gaming group included Mark Mazer and Curtis Baer playing Team Axis and Team Soviet consisting of Kevin Valerien, Chip Saltsman and Mark Stille (during the first part of the campaign). We had a blast and hope you enjoy this after-action report.

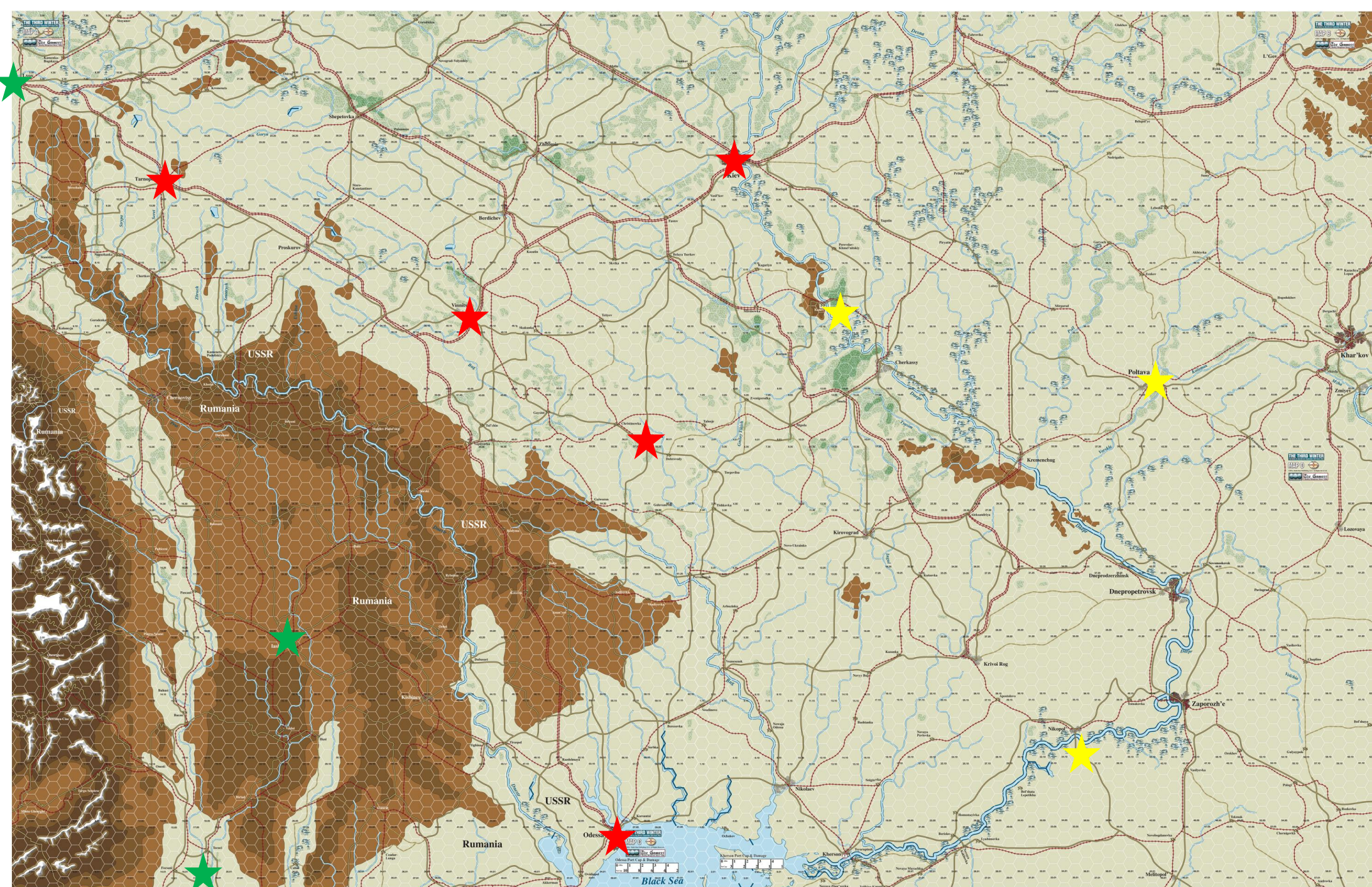
First, let’s have a look at the map.





The Game Space:

- **Dnepr River** – The main initial barrier, stretching from Kiev in the center north to Kherson in the center south. The southern portion is “Volga-Class” and very difficult to cross.
- **Moldovan Hills** – The big blob of Hills/Rough terrain comprising then Bessarabia (modern Moldova) between the Dnestr and Prut Rivers (where it says “Rumania” on the map.
- **Carpathian Mountains** – the snow-peaked western map edge.
- **Numerous minor rivers** and estuaries lie across the path of advance, as well as Woods terrain in the north.



Victory:

The Soviets must capture:

- **Cities (2 VP each)** – Red stars from north to south: Kiev, Tarnopol, Vinnitsa, Uman and Odessa.
- **Map Edge (2 VP each)** – Occupy northwest or southwest map edges (green stars). Exiting units in southwest or occupying Iasi (green star) will likely force Rumanian surrender (another 2 VP)
- **Axis HQ** – Destroy Army (1 VP) or Army Group (2 VP) HQ
- **Avoid Axis VP** – Yellow stars are -1 VP if Axis-held on a specific date.

Points needed:

- 6 or less – Axis win
 - 7-11 – Draw
 - 12+ - Soviet win
- Historically, the Soviets got 8 VP.

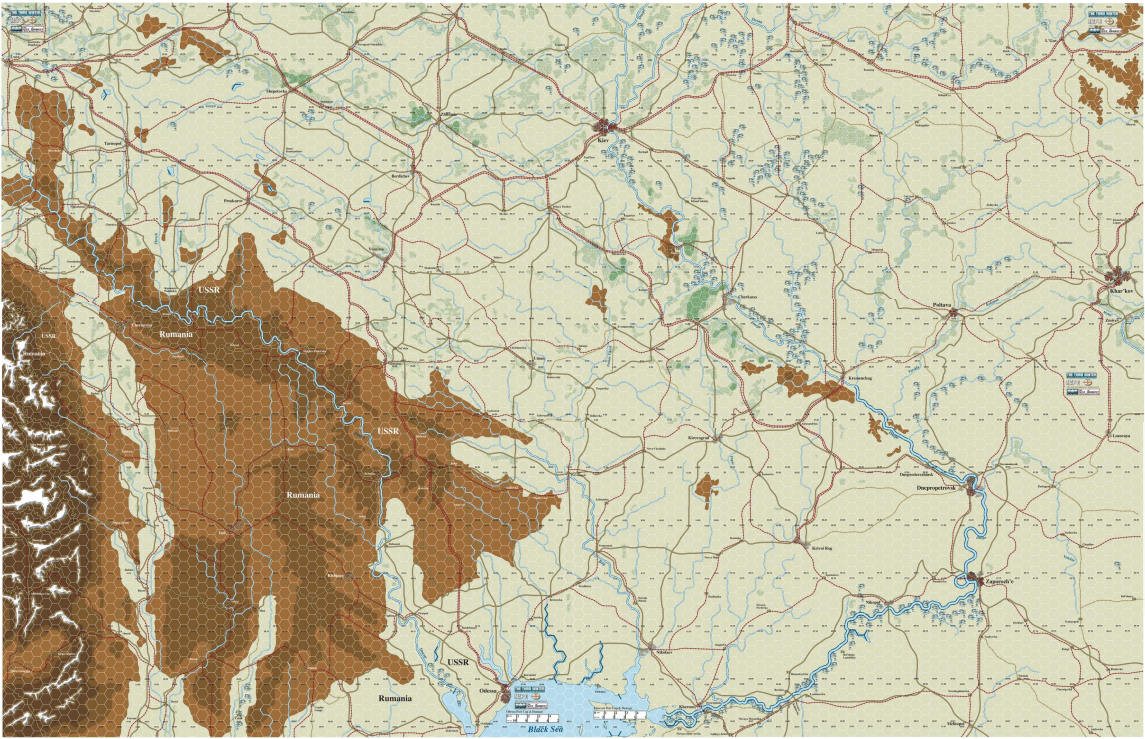
The Axis Game Plan:

Team Axis had several general principles:

- **Hold the Dnepr** – Because the Dnepr is so formidable, they felt they could mass Panzer units to batter or contain Soviet bridgeheads until winter (when the Dnepr freezes and can be crossed).
- **Run for the (Moldovan) Hills** – Once the Dnepr froze, withdraw to the Hill/Rough terrain, ceding Kiev, Uman and Vinnitsa.
- **Prepare counterattack lanes** – Avoid defending Open Terrain; make the Soviets occupy it so Panzers can counterattack into the Open areas. Strike deep if the opportunity presents itself.
- **Local Air Superiority when needed** – After a few turns of being battered by Soviet Air Base Barrages, the Luftwaffe kept its planes out of Soviet mission range limits. They chose to establish local superiority if needed over a specific area.

Game Start

26 Sept 1944 is Turn 1. Poltava is a surrounded fortress deep behind the lines. The Soviets forces parachuted into the Kanev area and have secured a small bridgehead across the Dnepr. Another 1-division bridgehead exits at the very top of the map. The lines are solid from Dnepropetrovsk south, but near Kiev, Cherkassy and Kremenchug the “Race to the Dnepr” is a “broken-field running” situation, with the Soviets on the chase.



Note to Reader:

We didn't start to photograph the game until Turn 3, and only got a turn-by-turn capture going in mid-October 1943. But the narrative is straightforward. We got better at managing light, so the picture quality improved over the course of the game. Some of these pages were posted periodically on the OCS Facebook page or on the Consimworld OCS Forum, and they have been updated since.

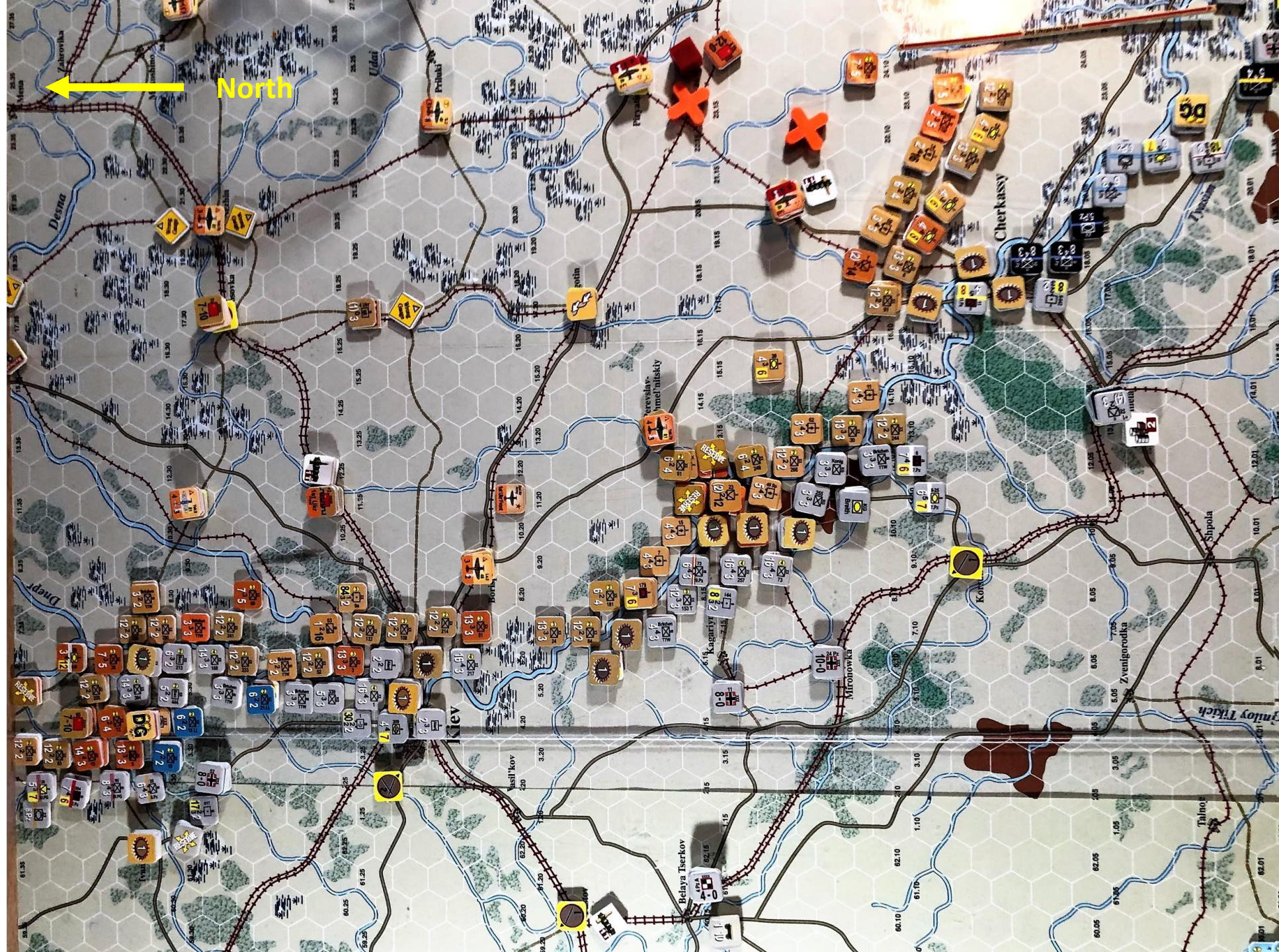
The Soviet Game Plan:

- **Create Multiple Problems** – We wanted the Axis reacting to more than they could handle. Initially that meant multiple bothersome Dnepr bridgeheads. Later we planned for multiple breakthroughs.
- **Destroy Axis Infantry** – They have a lot of Panzers and get decent replacements. Infantry is much harder to replace, so we would concentrate on killing infantry steps, forcing Panzers into the front line.
- **Anti-Air Campaign** – Destroy the Luftwaffe by Fighter Sweeps or bombing it at every opportunity. Once they pulled out of range, set up overlapping Patrol Zones and Flak Divisions to force them to engage our best fighters when they needed air superiority. We hoped to wear their air units out.
- **Avoid their Panzers** – We intended to fight wherever Panzers weren't present, preserving our mobile formations.
- **Front Switching** – Team Soviet probably didn't do this often enough. Should you keep a Front on Offense as long as possible or switch between Fronts frequently? The Axis particularly feared 1st & 2nd Ukrainian working in tandem, but the rapid switching might have been more effective.
- **Limits** – While there ARE 37 Soviet MUF, 7 must stay in the RVGK and each Front must have a minimum of 2. The maximum available to 2 Offensive Fronts is 26.

Oct 1 1943 end Axis 2nd Player 1st

Ukrainian Front

- The First Ukrainian scored a major success on 26 Oct when overruns into the northernmost Soviet Dnepr bridgehead established a lodgment the Axis couldn't eliminate. The Kanev bridgehead is occupied but hemmed in by Axis forces. Attacks into Kiev went nowhere, and the Axis still occupies several hexes on the east bank of the river.
- Near Cherkassy, part of the 1st Ukrainian Front at present, Soviet forces are massing, but have not had sufficient SP to assault the area, and the Axis players—well aware of the region's importance—are trying to make it impregnable.



Oct 1 1943 end Axis 2nd Player 2nd

Ukrainian Front

- What's with the teensey Front with a 15-mile front line?? The first mission of the 2nd Ukrainian Front is to capture Poltava (a 2-hex Minor City under all the Soviet units near the shiny light-reflecting spot). The Soviets have four turns to do this, or they lose 1 VP. Sometimes the city falls easily, sometimes you have to really pound it. We needed three turns, but the city finally capitulated this turn. We reduced the 2nd Ukrainian's "frontage" until we could carry this out, as most SP was sent to 1st Ukrainian.
- We were using the colored blocks to indicate HQs assigned to a given Front (same color as the Front). Green blocks indicate HQs which are outside the Front's command range.



Oct 1 1943 end Axis 2nd Player 3rd

Ukrainian Front

- The Front is in Regrouping Posture, so isn't conducting offensive operations.
- That doesn't mean nothing is happening, however. The Soviets need to move up Pontoons to establish potential crossing sites, build Air Bases, and generally get ready for action.





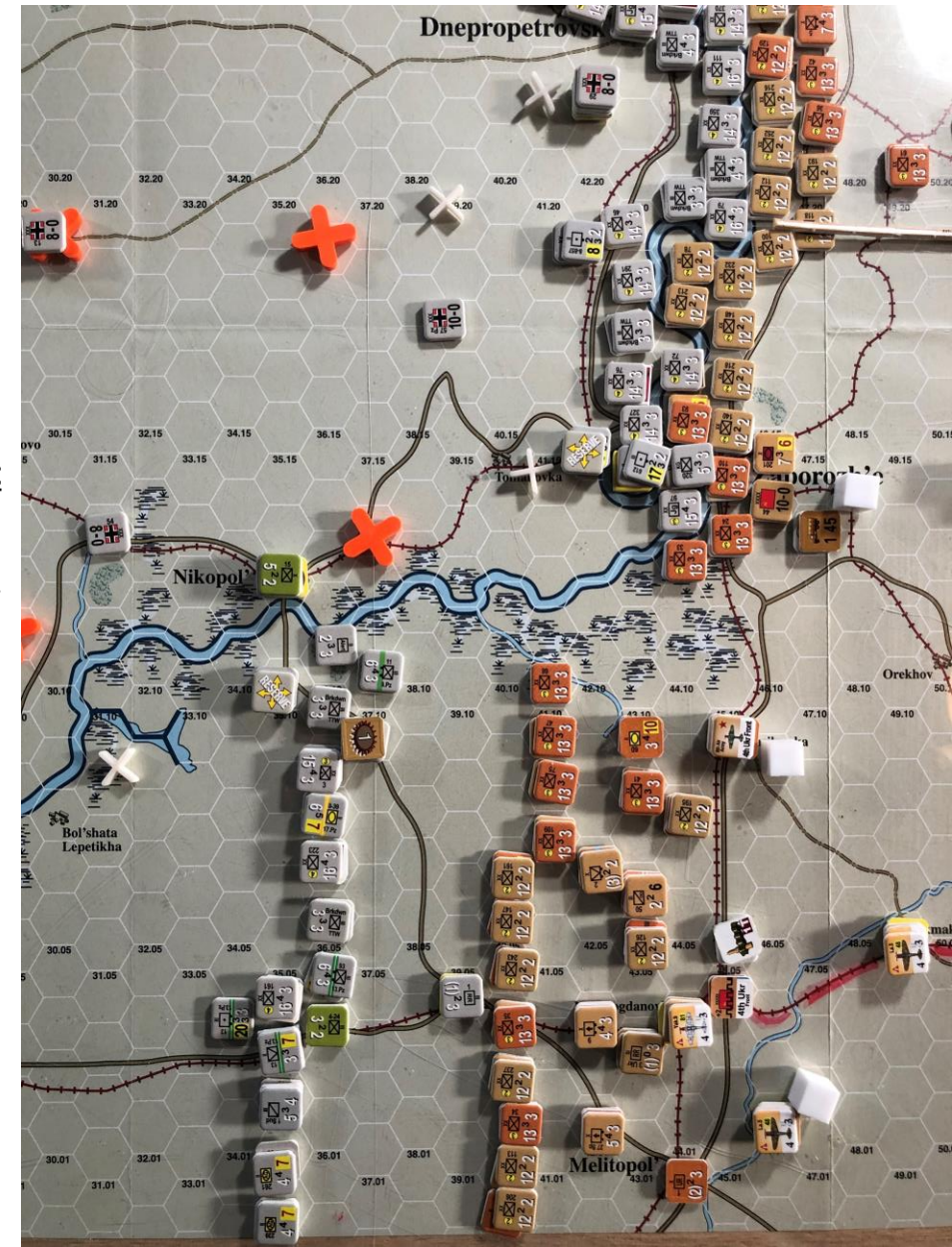
Oct 5 1943 end Axis 2nd Player 1st

Ukrainian Front

- The 1st Ukrainian Front goes on Regrouping Posture to allow either 3rd or 4th to go on Offense.
- The Red Expo Marker lines on the map indicate Rail lines that have been converted to Soviet gauge.

4th Ukrainian Front

- Also in Regrouping Posture, the Front continues to advance. It encounters the first sneaky Axis roadblock in the form of units squatting on the rail line.





Oct 5 1943 end Axis 2nd Player 2nd Ukrainian Front

- This is the only Soviet Front in Offensive Posture this turn
Boundary aperture is much wider than before. The focus is to get up to the Dnepr, a Major River at this point, and see if we can force a crossing. The Best hexes to cross into are anything but Open Terrain, where friendly Axis panzers will respectfully try to crush us.
- There may be other opportunities at Cherkassy. The terrain here is difficult, but that plays somewhat to Soviet advantage. Most Axis armor is “yellow box” which is halved in the Heavy Woods terrain, but most Soviet MUFs are “red box” which is not. (The same effect happens attacking across Frozen Minor Rivers).
- For Axis players defending Cherkassy, the hexes highlighted in red are important to hold. It will take the Soviets some time to get through them and holding them prevents the Soviets from assaulting the city hexes for some time.
- Also note that the road through the Swamp hexes can only be entered from the direction of the red arrow with Truck/Track MA units. This is difficult terrain!





Oct 5 1943 end Axis 2nd Player 3rd Ukrainian Front

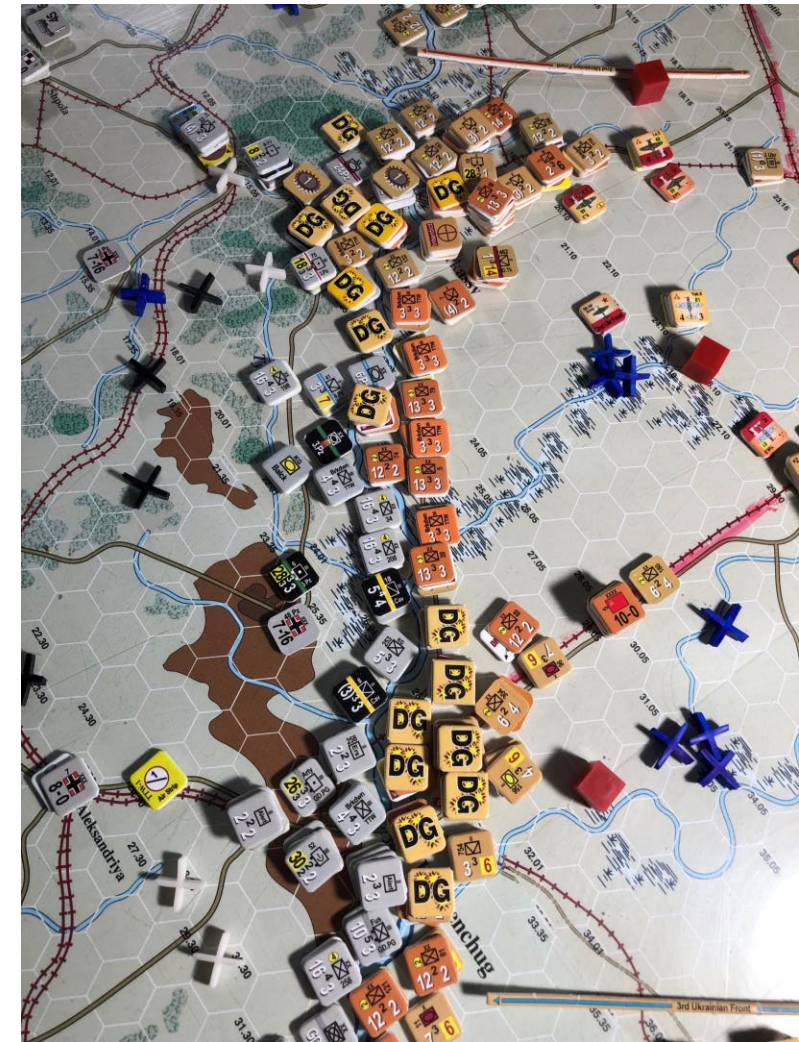
- The left-most photo is what the Axis players see. The rightmost photo is what the Soviet players see. Each orange "X" marks a Pontoon location. Our plan was to jump the river and try to battle our way into the rough terrain hexes (you can see one 13-3-3 already over the river, protected by the Regrouping Front benefits). There is opportunity here, but the SP we need ends up sucked into the fight at Cherkassy.





Oct 19 1943 end Soviet 1st Player 2nd Ukrainian Front

- Fighting at Cherkassy was the Soviet focus over the next few turns. We had some excellent good fortune with a barrage and attack that cleared two hexes of Cherkassy, and simultaneously looped around to the north. The Hedgehog is a one-hex finger of Axis units, propped up by the 24th Panzer Division. This battle brought many of the Axis MUF packing into the area, which meant they were NOT present near the 1st Ukrainian Front.
- In general, when we not sufficiently causing lots of problems for the Axis, we found ourselves “stuffed” by multiple Panzer divisions.
- On their turn, the Axis utilized a favorite tactic: DG as many of the potential attackers as possible to blunt our offensive capability (see image at right after their turn’s “DG Fest”).
- Cherkassy is one of four Rail crossings in the Major River portion of the Dnepr. It has the largest area for a bridgehead to expand protected by Close Terrain. A lodgement here threatens all Axis forces in the Dnepr Bend, making this critical terrain for both armies.
- The shoving match here killed steps on both sides, and it consumed supply at a great rate. But we didn’t think we would be able to break through. So, we tried something else . . .



Oct 26 1943 End Soviet 1st player turn

With the Axis armor concentrated in Cherkassy, we unleashed 1st Ukrainian to strike to the south and attempt to behind the Axis. They widened the bridgehead then had a banner breakthrough turn, other than the Mud which slowed movement to a crawl. The path was clear to the rear of the forces confronting 2nd Ukrainian.



Oct 26 1943 End Axis 2nd player turn

Team Axis had only a few units they could disengage and throw into the breach. Again, they DG every Soviet stack that they could, in order to slow down the onrush.

Oct 29 1943, Soviet 1st player turn,
Pre-Soviet combat phase.

The Soviets took the first turn and used it to surround and destroy all the blocking force units. The Dnepr line had been broken, and the Cherkassy defense force was facing trouble. This is prime Mud season (66% chance of Mud in later October), so nobody is moving very quickly.





Oct 29 1943, Axis 2nd player turn, 1st Ukrainian Front

The Axis needed to contend with a big Soviet breakthrough. Their response was to pull back out of Cherkassy and free up mobile formations which dared the Soviets to come into the open terrain. They blocked potential avenues of advance, though the mud made this something of a slow-motion dance.

2nd Ukrainian Front

Once again, the Axis DGd all menacing-looking Soviet stacks.

But they had one more trick up their sleeve . . .





Oct 29 1943, Axis 2nd player turn, 3rd Ukrainian Front

The southern portion of the map has been pretty quiet. The Pontoon assault in the 3rd Ukrainian Front sector hasn't ever gone in. Both Fronts have been Regrouping since game start. 4th Ukrainian has followed up on the withdrawal by the Axis forces, positioning itself for whenever the Freeze arrives and makes the opportunity to cross the Dnepr more feasible.

What isn't evident from looking at this photo is the degree to which the Axis forces have been sending units away to bolster 2nd Ukrainian. Their lines have started to thin considerably, but we Soviets never caught on.

Oct 29 1943, Axis 2nd player turn, 4th Ukrainian Front



Nov 1 1943, Axis 2nd player turn, 1st Ukrainian Front

The Soviet units were at the end of their logistical capacity, and we decided to put 1st Ukrainian on Regrouping Posture so we could move the Front HQ forward. It is now positioned at the red circle. All is well, we're in Regrouping, nobody is going to bother us. Early November is also when the mud disappears, and the ground conditions become either Dry or Freeze—both conducive to faster moving forces.

By the way, all those Hungarian units are out of position. They aren't supposed to be outside Map A. We missed that, and the eager northern Axis commander pulled in every unit he could find to man his lines.



Nov 1 1943, Axis 2nd player turn, 1st Ukrainian Front

The Axis players look carefully at the thin lines in front of Kiev (remember they still hold the eastern hex of the city as a bridgehead). They decide to unleash 1st SS Panzer in an Exploit spoiling attack. Regrouping units have a +1 AR when defending and can barrage any attacking stack on the 12-16 column, even during an Overrun (“Regrouping” represents the considerable defensive works and in-depth positions the Soviets created when they had a Front go onto the defensive—the Axis left these Fronts alone.)

Except this time, when the barrage rolled a “3”, the Overrun blew through the Soviet lines and suddenly the steppe beckoned before them.



Nov 5 1943, end Axis 1st Player turn

The Soviets really needed to win the initiative roll, and this was the first of several major game moments it didn't happen. The Axis incursion boiled over into a major Soviet emergency.

- Coincidentally, 5 Nov 43, is by historical schedule when the Soviets liberated Kiev. But 1st SS Pz Div celebrated by blasting eastwards out of Kiev and creating an unauthorized crisis. They brought their Mini-me 1st Panzer and jackbooted marching Infantry with them, the dogs!
- All units in the red rectangle are out of Trace AND cut off from the Soviet 1st Ukrainian Front Command Radius, so they don't have the Regrouping Front benefits.
- The 1st Ukrainian Front HQ had been forced to displace. It must be on Regrouping status for at least two more turns (there is no provision for emergency Posture change).
- The Axis player scrupulously avoided getting within 5 hexes of the RVGK marker so those units wouldn't be released (next time I will hide it!)
- There are nearly no Soviet forces in front of the Axis units.

Is there some way the Soviets can MacGyver their way out of this crisis?



Soviet Recovery Plan 1

Some turns you can conduct on auto-pilot. Other turns need careful planning and examination of every option available. This was our disaster-management scheme:

- Place 2nd Ukr on "Regrouping" Posture. Move the Front boundary to the red line (there are at least 3 HQ in the new 1st Ukr Front area, will be four shortly).
- Regauge the rail line to red circle, then rail the 1st Ukr Front HQ there (sadly this will prevent us from railng RVGK 1 up into position for a turn). This will make the hex detrainable.
- Rail a Pontoon or HQ to the red circle, so we can bridge the Major River next turn.
- Place a Special Truck Extender somewhere near the yellow circle. This will bring Trace, but not Regrouping Front defensive benefits.
- Put the Air Army Marker at the orange circle, making the three German fighter bases in range. They can't be Swept in Regrouping Posture, but they can be targeted by escorted Air Base Barrages (facility table). Same with Interdiction Barrages on the Axis at Kiev. (Note: Independent Air Units can Sweep!)
- Pull units into RVGK 2 from the 2nd Ukr area, which will be able to deploy if the Axis moves across the purple dashed line, or on the second turn.



Soviet Recovery Plan 2

- Surround and attack the 1st SS AG Bn (blue circle) as the one attack that can be made, probably using the Tank Corps from the RVGK. The unit is in clear terrain. Combined attacks with units that can/can't get Regrouping Front benefits are allowed, and we will use a 4-AR unit from the pocket.
- Get units into the dashed line blocking hexes (this may take 2 turns) hold the shoulder of the breach and establish a line from which the counterattack will be launched. We will only have 1 Rail Cap left (after moving the 1st Ukr Front and a Pontoon). We can also air transport the one Air-droppable Airborne Brigade to 17.29.
- Plaster the Axis forces with Interdiction missions.
- Get an HQ assigned to the 2nd Ukr Front to one of the green circle locations. 20.16 is probably best, as it can throw to the Front boundary.
- Yellow dashed line depends on the forces available but would be the "get in their grille" approach to containing the Axis.



2nd Ukrainian Front

- The yellow line is 20 hexes from the RVGK 2 marker. Units north of this line which can reach the RVGK as if they were moving in Strat Mode may enter for no fuel expenditure. The yellow circle is 7 MPs from RVGK 2, so that means much of the infantry and other units near Cherkassy can get there if need be.
- We will need to bulk up the front line by Cherkassy to free up the mobile formations.
- Blue line is current 2nd Ukr Front's Command Range.
- And we need to do all this without overcommitting and weakening ourselves elsewhere.



Soviet Move in process

- The SS AG Bn in B10.30 has been surrounded, DG'ed and will perish in the upcoming combat.



End Soviet 5 Nov 43 turn

- Trace restored to the units in the pocket, units in place to hold up Axis incursion, the Axis main road Interdicted, and more help is on the way. All units have the Regrouping Front defensive benefits.
- The Soviet Marshal staff would like to extend thanks to advisors who sent in suggestions and help!



7.

Axis Action Shot – end of 8 Nov 43

Movement Phase

- The Soviets won the Initiative roll and made the Axis go first. 1st Ukrainian has one more turn it is required to be on Regrouping, and 2nd Ukrainian has two. Both Fronts have Artillery Barrage markers nearing “ready”.
- The Axis forces seem to have “turtled up” a bit, but there is plenty of combat power here—elements of the 1st SS and 3rd SS Panzer as well as the 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions are visible and I assume multiple other mobile divisions lurk nearby.



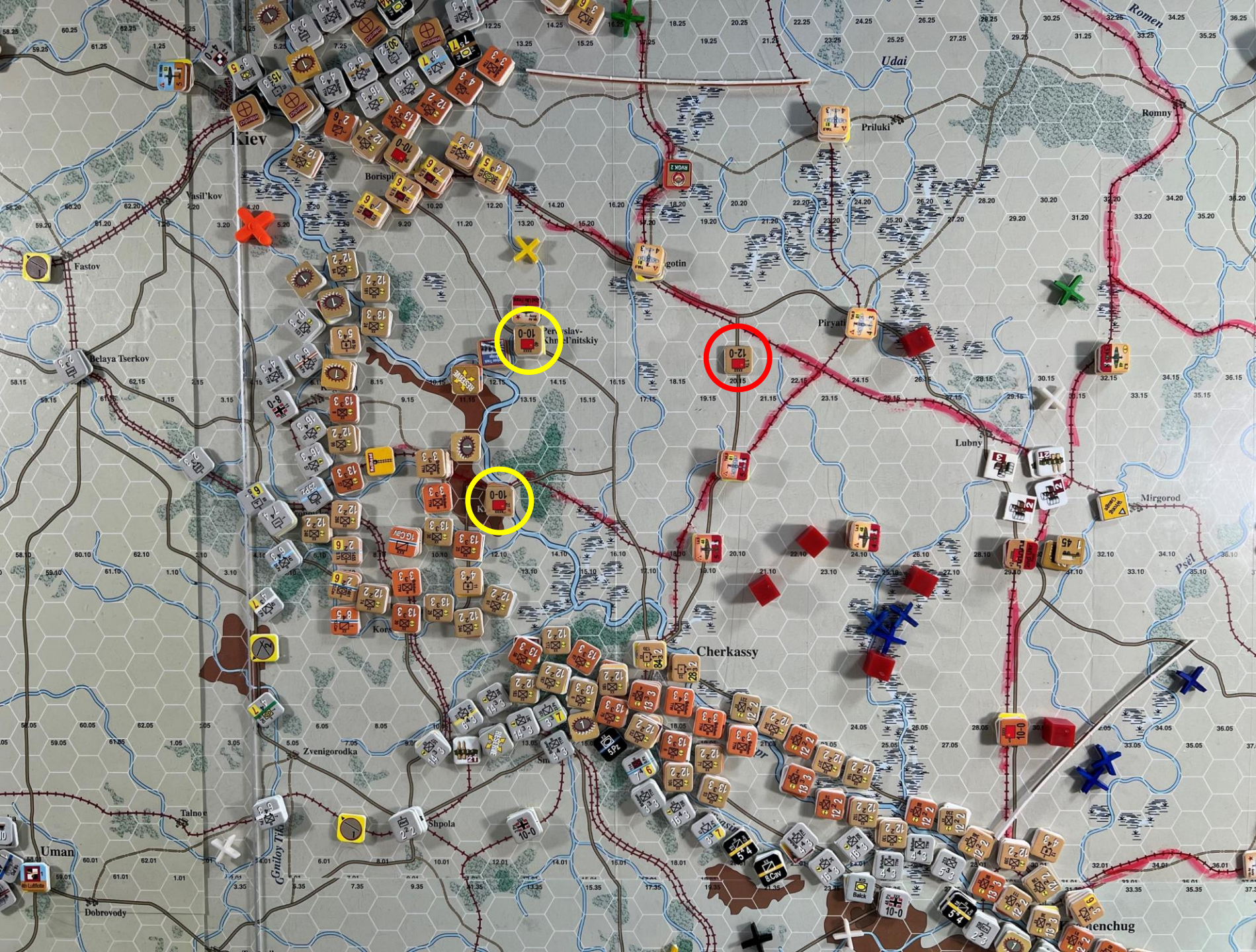
8 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- Supply restored, the First Ukrainian Front pulled out of the “gooseneck” area, which the German forces seemed to be eyeing. Four Interdiction markers slowed down the Axis mobility as well.
- It looks nice and innocent, but both players love Maskirovka, and there are multiple hidden Panzer divisions and Tank Corps in this photo.
- The red lines on the map designate rail lines converted to Soviet gauge. The orange blocks mark HQs assigned to the 1st Ukrainian Front.



12 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- The Axis player pulled back during his turn and set up positions in front of Kiev that looked like biting an Ankylosaurus would be more productive than attacking them. The Soviets went on Offensive Posture, barraged, attacked and managed to push the forces back one hex.
- It was the diversionary attack with the Soviet 9th Mech and 10th Tank that blew a small hole in the Axis lines. They will likely attract Axis mobile formations in response.
- The Germans won the initiative roll for 15 November, and they realized an Army HQ was sitting alone in B3.25, just waiting for Soviet tanks to overrun it. They will fix that but must go first to do so.
- And the Random Event for 15 Nov was the rare one where the Rumanians are no longer bound by geography. Look for them to appear in the lines soon.



8 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 2nd Ukrainian is still on Regrouping Posture. But even in this posture advance is still possible, right?
- The terrain here can be real logistical challenge. The 12-0 Soviet HQ (red circle) can Throw from the 2nd Ukrainian's Command Range to all units in the Cherkassy area, barely, and can also reach along the road to the entire Dnepr force from 2nd Ukrainian.
- The two 10-0 HQ (yellow circle) can throw Trace to the units in the Kanev bridgehead, but no further.
- One other 10-0 just south of the Front HQ is a case of redundancy for units along the Dnepr.



12 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- The 2nd Ukrainian Front is eligible to go active next turn. If so, it has options. The big “no man’s land” open area is regarded by both sides as dangerous to enter. The Axis would love the Soviets to go south instead of west, and the Soviets would love the Axis to engage them in open terrain.
- On the other hand, there was a real missed opportunity for us Soviet players to send units out to squat on vital/annoying Road/Rail lines. AR2 units are good choices for this because the Soviets can always use a few of them in the Dead Pile as rebuilding stock (they receive an AR2 Eq Repl on 50% of their Repl rolls).



12 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- Third Ukrainian Front has been quiet the whole game thus far. The Soviet players suspect the Axis of thinning out the river line to provide infantry forces elsewhere (notice the Move Mode division in D30.35). And we realized that the Grossdeutschland PG division disappeared from view a few turns ago . . .
- (Making it a practice to regularly photograph your game, especially for players who don't live where the game is set up, is a great way to use "aerial reconnaissance" to detect your opponents plans and allows you to plan out your schemes.)
- Another missed opportunity here: Fronts on Regrouping Posture cannot Fighter Sweep or perform Barrage Missions that use the Barrage Table. But the Barrage vs. Facilities table is fair game. Since we suspected the Axis of moving units out, a campaign of Interdicting the main rail lines would have been wise. The Axis fighters are too far away for the Soviet air unit range limitations to allow Sweeps by the Independent air units, but escorted Trainbusting missions would have forced them to engage.



1 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- Fourth Ukrainian Front has advanced furthest of any Front, despite never having gone on offense, as it follows the German withdrawal. At one point, the Germans seemed to be planning a double envelopment (bursting south out of Nikopol and east from the map edge), but now the sides are just glaring at each other across the Dnepr.
- Possessing a Nikopol bridgehead (10 hexes south of the Dnepr and within 5 hexes of Nikopol) on 1 Feb 44 is a -1 VP penalty for the Soviets. But this is a tall order in a game starting 26 Sept 1943! Had a Nikopol bridgehead existed at this point we would certainly have put the 4th Ukrainian on Offensive Posture to reduce it.



15 Nov 43 Axis 1st Player Turn

- The Axis player saw a thin Soviet incursion and launched an attack at B5.29 to snip it off (the white circle hex). But the Soviet Tank Corps hiding under the infantry division held the hex!
- The sneaky Axis commander jumped artillery forward and used railway cannons to barrage the air base in B9.22, killing some air unit steps. Does their evil know no bounds?!
- The Axis also massed several divisions of Panzer reserves in the area near the yellow circle. I believe they were planning to swarm the Soviet breakthrough next turn. The Axis were hampered by several Interdiction missions, part of a Soviet strategy to carpet the area with these “molasses movement” markers. The Soviets jumped that 12-2-2 Division in B6.22 into B5.23 to spot for an air barrage on the yellow circle hex in their turn—and flubbed the barrage roll!
- The Luftwaffe has taken heavy losses—many units in the dead pile, so they stage fighters at air bases outside Soviet air range where they can still provide patrol zones.
- (This photo is from the end of the 12 Nov 43 turn.)



15 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- Having adjusted the Front boundary, it is now 2nd Ukrainian Front that owns the Kanev area. They go on the Offensive this turn, swarming through the Axis line near B6.16. This looks like a serious threat to Kiev, just off the northern edge of the photos.
- A diversionary attack on the defensive lines near Cherkassy went nowhere, with defender surprise and what must be the Soviet's 8th AL2 result. (The DG hex was the target.)
- The 2nd Ukrainian got a spotter next to what we assumed was the main Axis reserve stack at B4.17 and DG'ed it. The seriousness of the threat to Kiev brought the panzer formations which had been in reserve there (and which evaded the 1st Ukrainian's own reserve-busting mission) barreling down to try and restore the situation.
- 2nd Ukrainian also has avoided advancing into the "no-man's land" around B8.05, as we are pretty sure more panzers are prepared to pounce from that innocent looking Axis force around B11.06. They may well rush north next turn to put pressure on the Soviets.



15 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 1st Ukrainian reinforced the success of its diversionary attack and pushed as far as its logistics would allow. It now has a four-hex wide incursion north of Kiev. Some of the Soviet tactics:
 - Interdiction markers on as many roads as possible.
 - Hide armor/mech units to avoid Tank Buster barrages.
 - Don't telegraph attacks with air barrages, use artillery instead (because it fires after Axis reaction phase). You can even Air barrage units in a different sector as a ruse.
- You can see the 2nd Ukrainian Front's units moving up from the south.
- Note the Rumanian unit that appeared in A56.30. The random event we rolled was the rare "Rumania Adopts National Defense Footing" releasing them from geographic constraints. Great. We will see 30+ Rumanian steps all over the place. Heaven forbid they try to stack with Hungarians. May the Random Event deities smite them with a Rumanian Surrender in January!
- What is the Axis to do? They had been discussing holding Kiev for the long haul, but this may no longer be possible—they may be pocketed if they stay in Kiev much longer. Stay tuned!

15 Nov 43 3rd Ukrainian Front

The maneuvering here is primarily the Axis player secretly thinning out his lines to feed the struggle over at Cherkassy, while the Soviets prepare airbases, pontoons and other material for a potential push into Kremenchug.



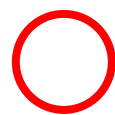
15 Nov 43 4th Ukrainian Front

More Regrouping Posture and more chess-like moves to see if one side or the Soviets can position a Pontoon to make a jump over the Dnepr. The Soviets are massing forces for a potential assault at either Nikopol (center of photo) or Berislav (lower left), where the only bridges exist downriver of Zaporozhe. There is a “rail ferry” at Kherson, but it can’t really support an offensive.

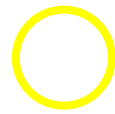


15 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 1st Ukrainian reinforced the success of its diversionary attack and pushed as far “as its logistics would allow.” (That was my loudly announced “fake problem” so the Axis wouldn’t know how far I could really stretch.) We now have a four-hex wide incursion north of Kiev. Some of the Soviet tactics:
 - Interdiction markers on as many roads as possible.
 - Hide armor/mech units to avoid Tank Buster barrages.
 - Don’t telegraph attacks with air barrages, use artillery instead.
- You can see the 2nd Ukrainian Front’s units moving up from the south.
- Note the Rumanian unit that appeared in A56.30. The random event rolled was the rare one “Rumania Adopts National Defense Footing” releasing them from geographic constraints. Great. We will see those 30+ steps all over the place. Heaven forbid they try to stack with Hungarians. May the Random Event deities smite them with a Rumanian Surrender in January!
- What is the Axis to do? They had been discussing holding Kiev for the long term, but this may no longer be possible. Oh, by the way, there is an Axis Army HQ sitting in D3.25, and trapping that would be a sweet bonus for the Soviets!
- In fact, with a double turn, Team Soviet thinks they can surround Kiev. How?



Red Circle = Soviet Pontoon



Blue Circle = Maximum Front Command Radius. We have positioned a 12-0 here, which can throw to units up to the yellow dashed line.



Red Arrow = Main push to capture rail lines and use rivers for “shoulders”.

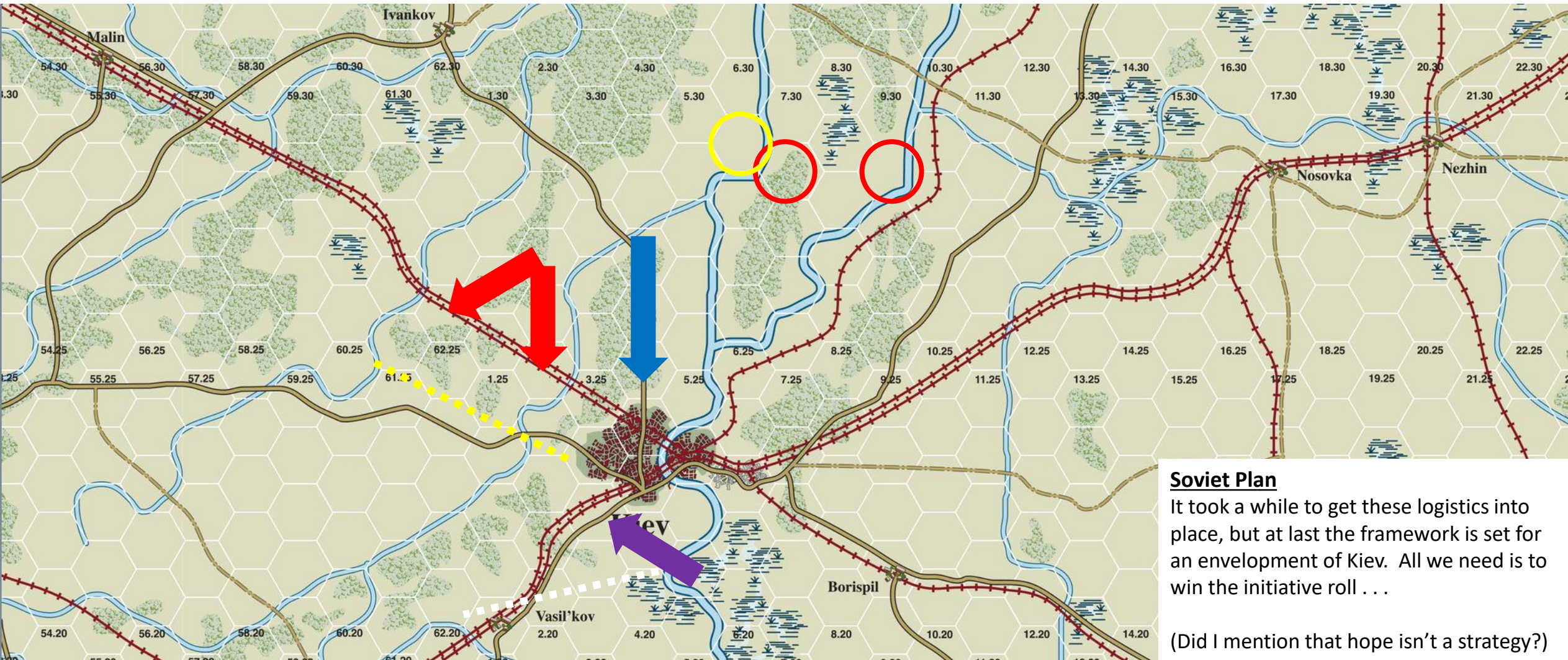


Blue Arrow = Alternate push, supply along road, especially if freeze conditions.



Purple Arrow = Wagon with 1 SP hiding in Swamp, plus a 14-4-3 Infantry Division. It can help seal off Kiev from the south.

White Line = Limit of 2nd Ukrainian supply network, will advance to this point.



Soviet Plan

It took a while to get these logistics into place, but at last the framework is set for an envelopment of Kiev. All we need is to win the initiative roll . . .

(Did I mention that hope isn't a strategy?)



19 Nov & 22 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turns

- On 19 Nov 43, 1st Ukrainian reinforced the success of its diversionary attack and pushed as far as its logistics would allow. It created a four-hex wide incursion north of Kiev. Don't see many Soviet multi-unit formations? There are 8 hiding in this picture.
- Who won the initiative roll and went first? The Axis, thank you very much. 22 Nov 43, our units forced the minor river (where you can see the 29th Tank Corps) and pushed up to B3.26. Its still a long way to close pincers around Kiev, and winning initiative would trap a lot of their units . . .
- Also note the 3-2-2 Soviet Breakdown in B6.22. There is one Axis step across the river, so we have moved in an attack force hiding under this unit.
- Throughout this offensive, the dice gods were not kind to the Soviets. We have had perhaps 10 AL2 results during the month of "No"-vember between 1st & 2nd Ukrainian. Its enough to make a Marshal weep!
- But consider that the Axis had pushed out from Kiev to displace the 1st Ukrainian Front HQ on 5 Nov, and these jaws are closing just 7 turns later—quite a turnaround for the Soviets!



26 Nov & 29 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turns

- Two more turns, two more Axis initiative roll wins, and twice more they can react. Winning the initiative would have been decisive on 22 Nov, now its better to put the Axis in a position where they feel they need to go first.
- The Germans pulled back a bit to avoid the northern pincer coming up from the 2nd Ukrainian Front, and left B5.23 open. Happily, we had a pre-positioned pontoon and could swarm across. This enabled a whole series of attacks these two turns that completed an encirclement of Kiev. 1st Ukrainian has several more turns it can be on Offensive Posture, so it might push forward, or it might set about reducing the city's defense force.
- Kiev has ample supply, I'm sure, plus it's a fortress plus it has a Kessel HQ, plus there are probably 5 steps in each Major City hex (Extremely Close terrain on the Combat Table). It will take some reducing!



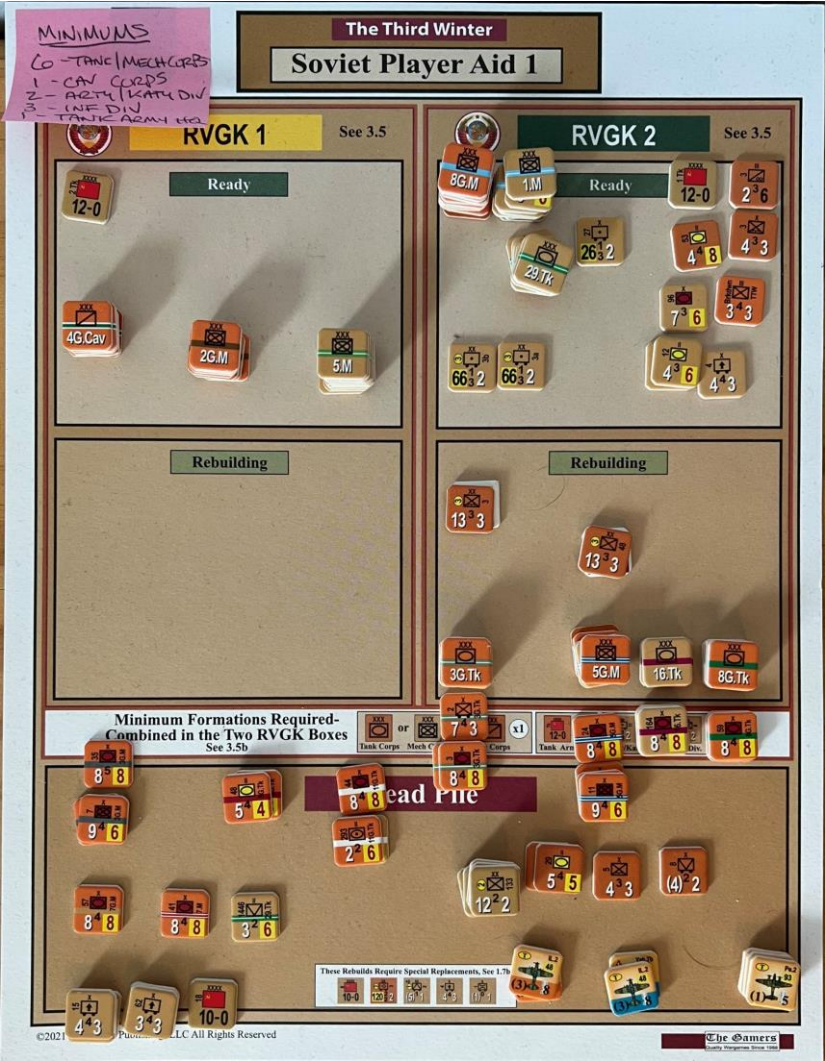
29 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- Closeup of the Kiev encirclement. Maybe there are as-yet unrevealed Soviet Multi-Unit formations!
- (Photo is looking towards the south)

Sidebar: Fun with the RVGK

Third Winter has two Soviet RVGK markers, which denote areas where units withdrew for substantial rebuilding and refitting during the campaign. They function the entry/exit point for off-map boxes that can themselves move around the map. A few things about the RVGK:

- Between the two RVGK boxes, the Soviet player must maintain a minimum number of formations:
 - 6 Tank/Mech Corps
 - 1 Cavalry Corps
 - 2 Artillery/Katyusha Divisions
 - 3 Infantry Divisions
 - 1 12-0 Tank Army HQ
- There are rules for entering and exiting either RVGK location, the most important being:
 - Units enter during the Reinforcement Phase, by either being rebuilt from the Dead Pile or being removed from the map (must be within 20 hexes of the marker and could get there via Strat Mode). Note that the “Strat Mode” requirement means they cannot start in or have a path that requires they move through an EZOC. However, the Strat Mode path can be longer than the unit could travel in one turn, as long as it is within 20 hexes.
 - Units must be fully rebuilt to exit, done in the Movement Phase. Any independent units must exit with a Tank Army HQ, up to 5 RE.
 - When exiting normally—not due to enemy encroachment, they are placed within 5 hexes of the RVGK marker and are fueled that Phase.
- It costs 5 RailCap to move an RVGK, and it brings all units in that RVGK along.



This was the contents of the RVGK during the 5 Nov 43 turn of our game. RVGK is covered in *TTW* 3.5.

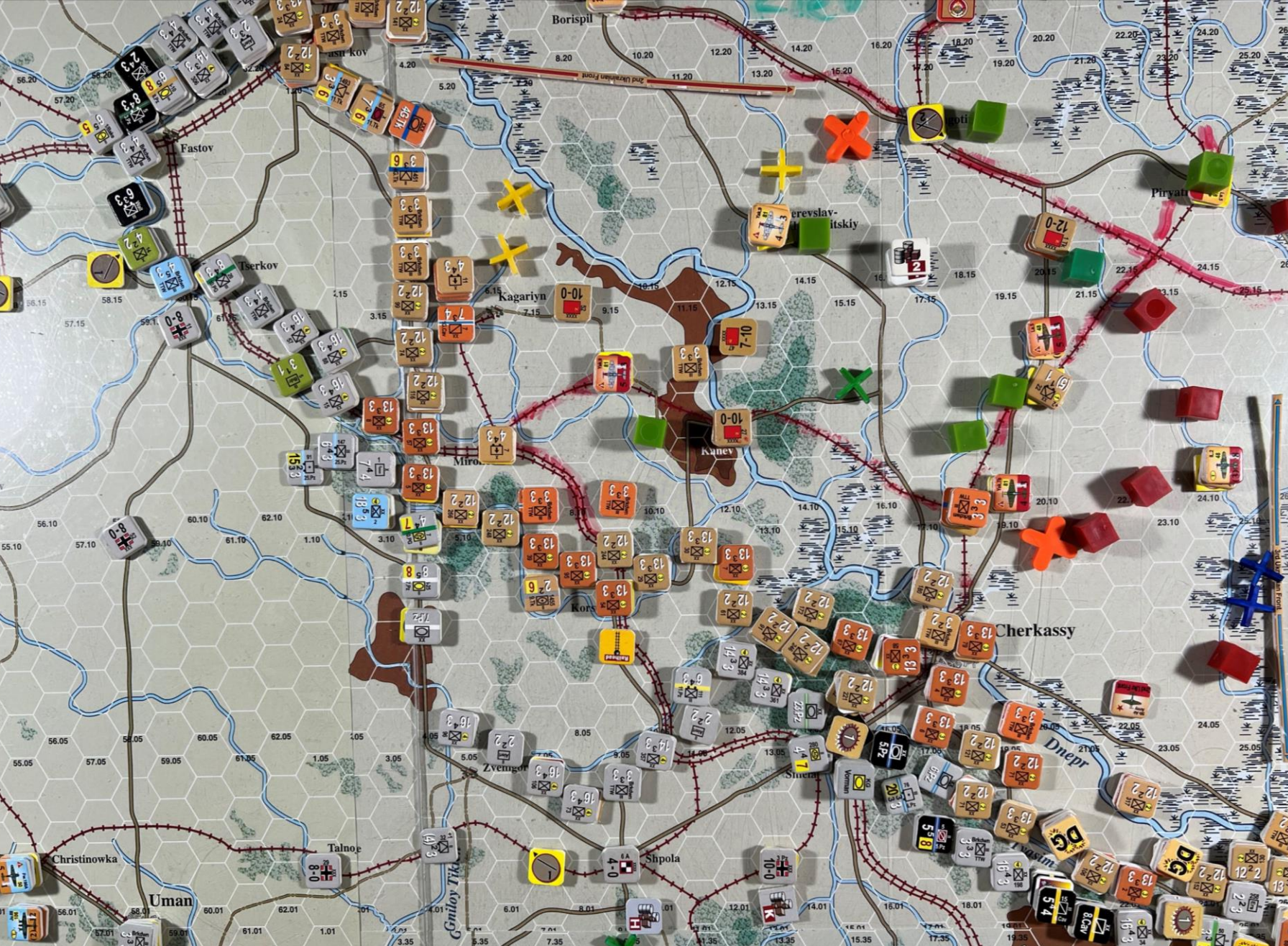
Now for the fun Maskirovka part:

- Contents of the RVGK are hidden behind Fog of War from the Axis Player.
- There are minimums, but no maximums. You could put 20 MUF in one if desired. You could then move that RVGK (they have movement limits) and have those 20 MUF pop out next turn in a new location. Since they are fueled for the Phase, you could redeploy that group of multi-unit formations a long distance for 5 Rail Cap.
- Even without moving the RVGK, this is a mechanism to rapidly redeploy Artillery or Infantry Divisions.
- Having an RVGK just behind where an enemy breakthrough is anticipated, since ALL units can materialize on the board if the Axis comes within 5 hexes, would be fun.
- Consolidation (OCS 13.9) is not allowed inside the RVGK (the Soviets used it for rebuilding units, not cannibalizing them), but you can certainly do so before entering—even if all that is left is an Organic Truck.
- Looking at this image, Team Soviet had only one 2-AR unit that could be rebuilt (the Guards AT Bde, since the 3-2-6 SU Bn's MUF isn't in the RVGK), and no 3-AR units. The Repl Table yields Eq Repls as AR2 50% of the time, 1-2 AR3 64% of the time, 1-2 AR4 42% of the time and an AR5 8% of the time. Be sure to lose enough of these in combat that you always have them ready for rebuilding!
- Yes, you can make your Repl roll and see what you received before you decide if to pull a MUF into the RVGK, such as if you luck out with an AR5 result!



19 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 2nd Ukrainian had the experience akin to shoving hard at a stuck door only to suddenly have it swing open, so they stumble inside. The Axis have pulled back to avoid fighting in the Open Terrain.
- At this stage, does the 2nd Ukraine fling itself south, west or northwest? Its main problem is also its logistical throw, as its units are at the limit of Trace from HQs in the Front Command Radius.
- Actually, they didn't fling themselves anywhere, as the Axis flung their forces into a counterattack trying to regain Cherkassy.



29 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 2nd Ukrainian Front did a great job advancing on Kiev from the south. Then they needed to react to a sudden Axis counterattack aimed at regaining Cherkassy. There were several big hammer blows back and forth, and the Soviets had to fall back a hex or two, but they have held the bridgehead.
- What's with all the open spaces? Both sides have allowed a "no man's land" to develop between their forces. These are generally open terrain areas, with each side having armor ready to unload on the first to encroach. Neither side has chosen to do so yet.
- The more we see 2nd Ukrainian held at bay, the more we think that we need to open the campaign in other areas. Plus, "Winter is Coming!" There have been "Freeze" rolls on Nov 26, 29 and the weather for 1 Dec is Freeze as well. This means that the Dnepr will be "Ice" as of 5 Dec, and that is often the signal for the Axis to abandon the Dnepr Bend. So, the 2nd Ukrainian went to "Regrouping" Posture on 26 Nov to enable the 3rd Ukrainian to go on Offense 29 Nov.



22 Nov and 29 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turns, Kremenchug

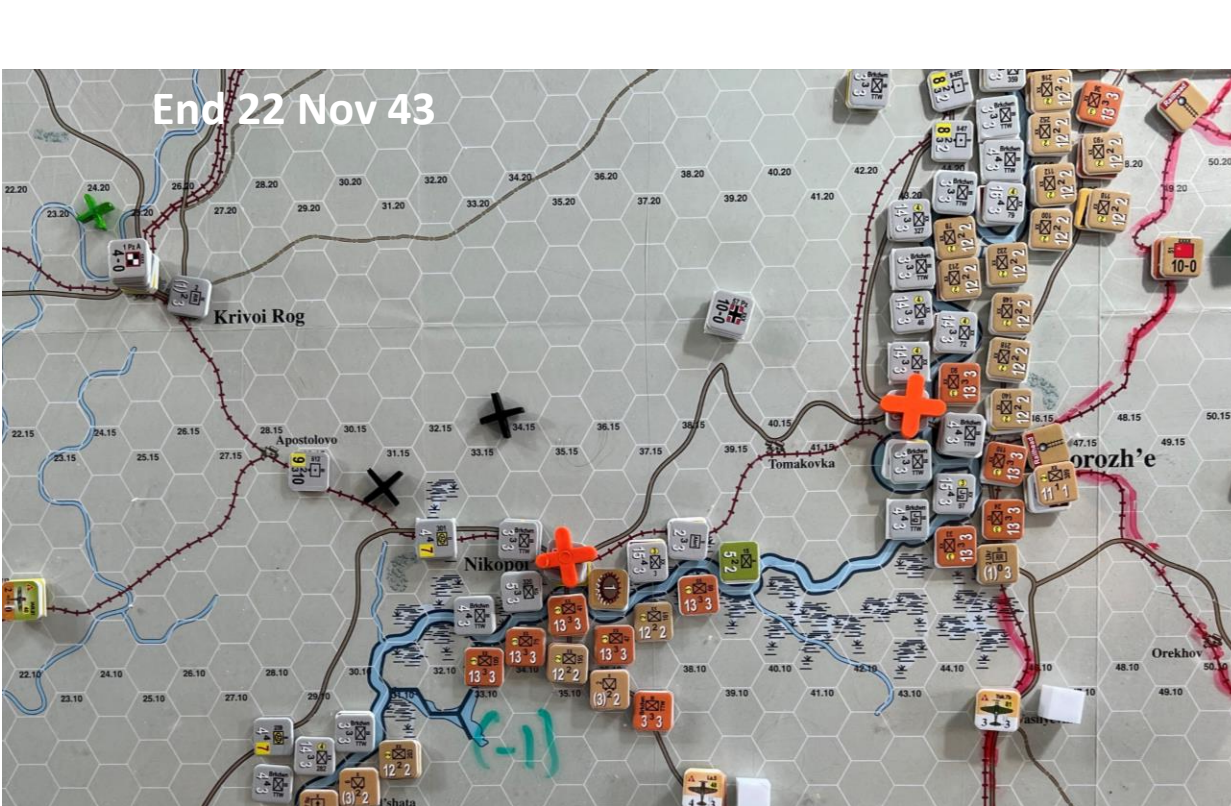
- Ah, Kremenchug! Across its quiet, pristine waters, stretch two rail and one road bridge in the area just before the Dnepr turns from Major River to Volga-Class (you can see the transition at D31.33). On 22 Nov nothing much seemed to be happening. But the Axis noted 2nd Ukrainian's transition to Regrouping Posture and surmised Kremenchug was a logical attack point. They were right.
- 29 Nov 43 the Soviet 3rd Ukrainian shifted its front boundary from the vicinity of B36.05 to B26.05 and leapt into action. Pontoons enabled a crossing north of the key bridges, and the Soviets established a good bridgehead. We absolutely expect a violent counterattack.



6.

29 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- Close-up photo of the Kremenchug bridgehead (photo looking to the south).



22 and 29 Nov 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn, Dnepr Bend

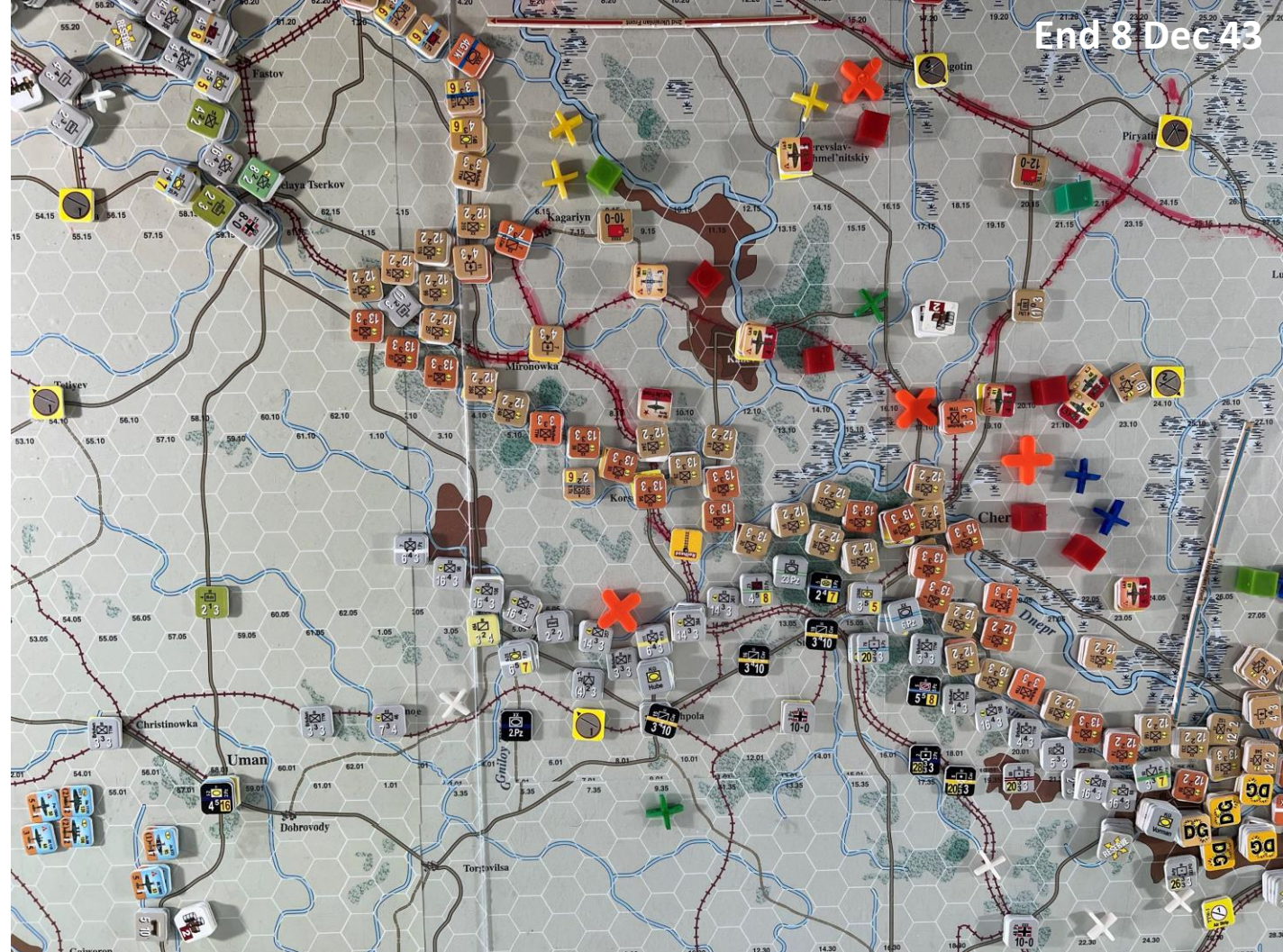
- The Dnepr Bend (The Dnepropetrovsk-Zaporozh'e area) is in the 4th Ukrainian sector. As river ice began to pile up, the German units began to think how far to the east they are compared with, say, Kiev (40 hexes!) So started the Great Skedaddle. Some of the units moved to reinforce Kremenchug, others are just headed due west (they need to walk, as the rail lines go through EZOCs).
- Blocking forces are in place at the bridges, which need to be rebuilt after they are captured. This means that there can't be a "hot pursuit" unless the Kremenchug or Cherkassy defenses fail.
- The Germans are looking forward to shortening their lines, but the Russians lines can get concentrated, too! Of course, the area around Krivoi Rog is totally open terrain, very difficult for infantry.



5-8-12 Dec 43 1st Ukrainian Front

Or, how I spent December 1943.

- Having surrounded Kiev at the end of November 1943, 1st Ukrainian goes into Regrouping Posture. Its time to let 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian have some assaulting fun.
- During this time, we are building air bases, resetting logistics, and generally getting ready.
- Several Open Terrain areas materialize in front of 1st Ukrainian, as the ever-hospitable Axis invites us to dance. Accepting the invitation from them is likely to prompt a panzer party.



5 & 8 Dec 43 2nd Ukrainian Front

Or “Mind the Gap”

- One of the Axis challenges is the length of their front line. From west of Kiev into the Dnepr Bend and back to Kherson, they simply cannot man its entirety with units. So, they decide to make a “virtue of necessity” and leave some gaps. These are “Open” in the sense of no units and Open Terrain, but they have powerful panzers in “predator mode” nearby. They hope we will stick our head in one of these nooses only to have it lopped off.



5-8-12 Dec 43 3rd Ukrainian Front

While other Fronts were relaxing and Regrouping, 3rd Ukrainian mounted a desperate attack on Kremenchug, just upriver of the Volga-class portion of the Dnepr. The Soviets forced their way across the river and into a major shoving match. Each side fed in multi-unit formations, each side made major attacks, but neither side could budge the other.



Gradually, we became aware that the battle was swinging to the Soviets not because of our smiting and smashing, but because of the Great Axis Skedaddle. Note the lack of any Germans at Dnepropetrovsk whatsoever on 12 December!

5-8-12 Dec 43 4th Ukrainian Front

Yes, the Axis player looked at several factors: the Dnepr River would freeze soon which would allow the Soviets to cross it much more easily, their front lines had thinned out, and they believed the Close terrain around the Dnestr River would be much better for their defense. If they depart the Dnepr Bend now, they might escape before the freezing river allowed the Soviets to give chase. In addition, the Soviet Front HQ are bound to Soviet gauge rail lines, which cannot be repaired quickly (and need bridge repair in any case). This seems to them like a great time for The Great Skeddadle.



Look Ma, no Axis! Indeed, only a few German troops remain in sight on 12 Dec 43, and most of those are manning roadblock and rail-block positions in difficult terrain.





End 19 Dec 43

19 Dec 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 1st Ukrainian went into Regrouping posture after surrounding Kiev and capturing all but two hexes (the two Hedgehogs in the middle of the photo). Since then, they have “oozed” their way forward towards the Axis lines, building air bases and resetting logistics.
- Kiev is a bone in the throat of the 1st Ukrainian advance, sitting as it does on a rail line nexus. We can’t rail/convert past the units there, so when this Front goes on Offense again, clearing Kiev will be priority one.
- Terrain north of Kiev doesn’t have a lot of east-west roads, making supply lines problematic.
- The Soviets have either won the initiative roll or the Germans have opted to go first the entire month of December. Our group refers to having “the Hammer” for the side going second in a turn (with the potential for back-to-back turns). The Axis players began calling their choice to go first “the Anvil” since they were avoiding being pounded by the Hammer. They have been fortunate to avoid several large encirclements this way.



End 15 Dec 43

The 85-mile Gap

- Well, what's this?! The Axis has opened a 17-hex gap between the forces confronting the 1st Ukrainian and the shoving match at Cherkassy held by the 2nd Ukrainian. Why would they allow this?
- First off, it's a trap. We suspect that there are significant Axis mobile formations on both those shoulders waiting to lop off a Soviet incursion. The Axis has posted big signs saying "Hi Soviets! VP Cities through here!" hoping the Soviets take the bait.
- Second, there aren't any rails through the gap. The Soviets can advance without rails, and Axis units are squatting on those lines.
- So, what are aspiring Soviet Front commanders to do? Attack one shoulder? The other? Advance into the gap and prepare for the mother of all mobile unit battles?

End 19 Dec 43

19 Dec 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 2nd Ukrainian Front has been inactive for a while. Their early success in capturing Cherkassy and breaking out of the Kanev bridgehead met with a tough Axis counterattack, particularly in front of Cherkassy. Both sides traded heavy blows, but the lines haven't changed by much. The Soviets don't have the strength to push through into the more open ground, but the Axis has been forced away from the river all along this part of the front.
- Things are most likely to change here if the Soviets press to the west, or when 3rd/4th Ukrainian finally move into the Dnepr bend.





End 19 Dec 43

19 Dec 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn

- 3rd Ukrainian has just switched to Regrouping Posture after an offensive designed to capture Kremenchug (under the Guards 12-2-2 division). This is the set of bridges just before the Dnepr becomes Volga Class, and a breakthrough here would cause instant problems for the Axis. Both sides massed big forces, both sides bashed each other, both sides wore themselves out doing so. The front lines barely moved, though the Front boundary (marked with a white line) shifted over to protect some of the Soviets with Regrouping Posture benefits from the 2nd Ukrainian.
- The Axis became more and more concerned with their forces being caught in the Dnepr bend and bugged out during December. They left garrisons behind in all the bridge locations. Once the Dnepr finally froze a few turns ago, Dnepropetrovsk fell, and repair of the bridges is halfway along. Dneprodzerzhinsk has resisted heroically, because of its seemingly magical ability to avoid DG results from barrages and inflict AL2 results.
- Once the bridges are repaired, look out!

5.

End 19 Dec 43

**19 Dec 43 end Soviet 2nd Player Turn**

- 4th Ukrainian went on Offense specifically to gain Dnepr River crossings. Three are in the process of being repaired at Zaporozh'e (which has no less than 3 separate bridges), Nikopol and Berislav.
- Soviet forces have crossed, not particularly worried since you can see how many Axis units are even in this photo. The evacuated units have been either busy setting up a new defensive line along the Bug River or adding oomph to the defenses at Kremenchug and Cherkassy.
- The Soviets thought they might even be able to push their way into Kherson (under the Interdiction marker), but the last part of the Axis withdrawal has halted them. Kherson's Rail Ferry can't be destroyed, which makes it a tempting target.
- Things will erupt into motion in just a few turns!



- The air missions is called “Trainbusting” in the v4.3 rules. It was formerly known as “Interdiction,” which some prefer. By whatever name, it can shape the battle space to your advantage!

26 Dec 43 Axis Reaction Phase of Soviet 2nd Player Turn

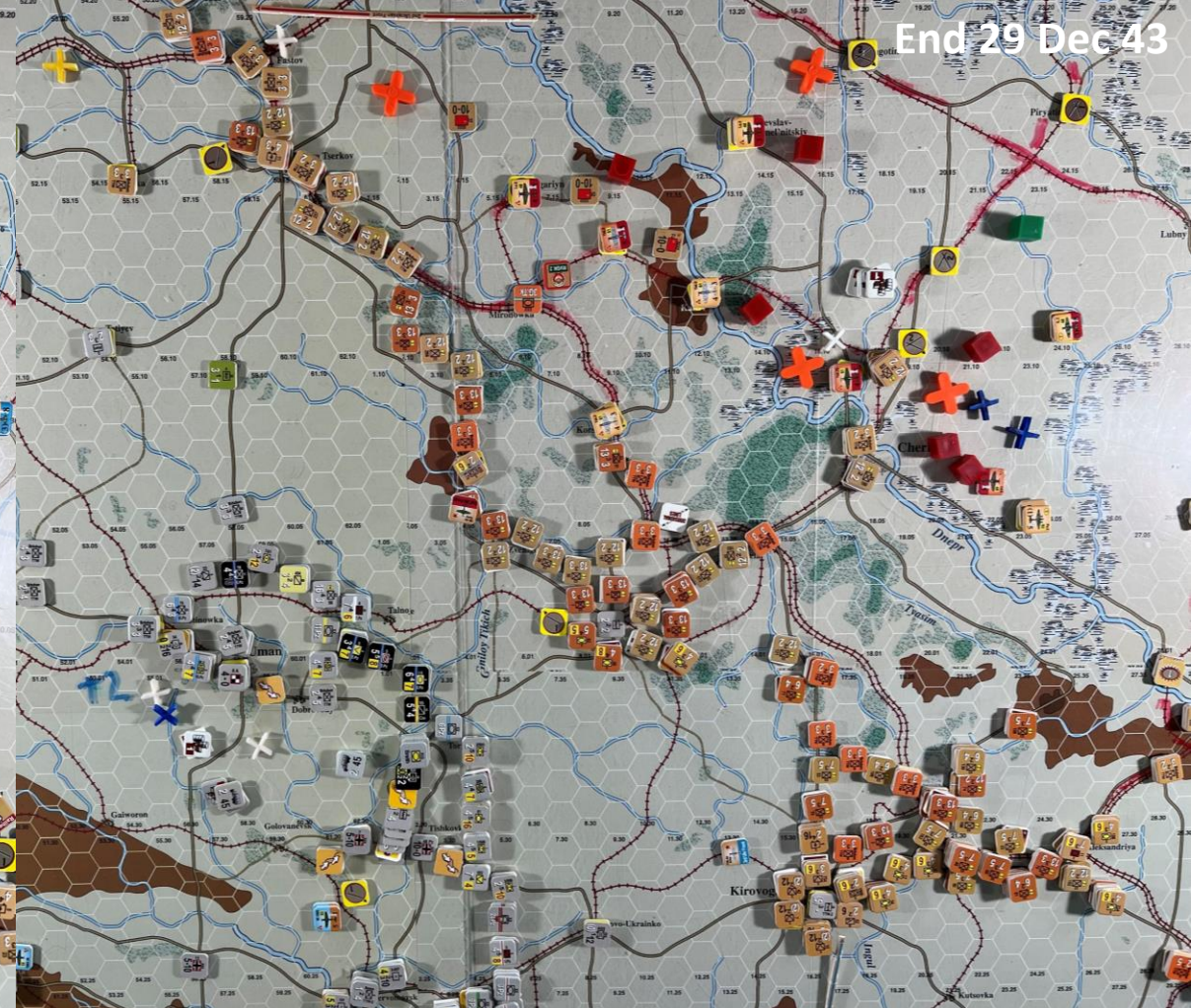
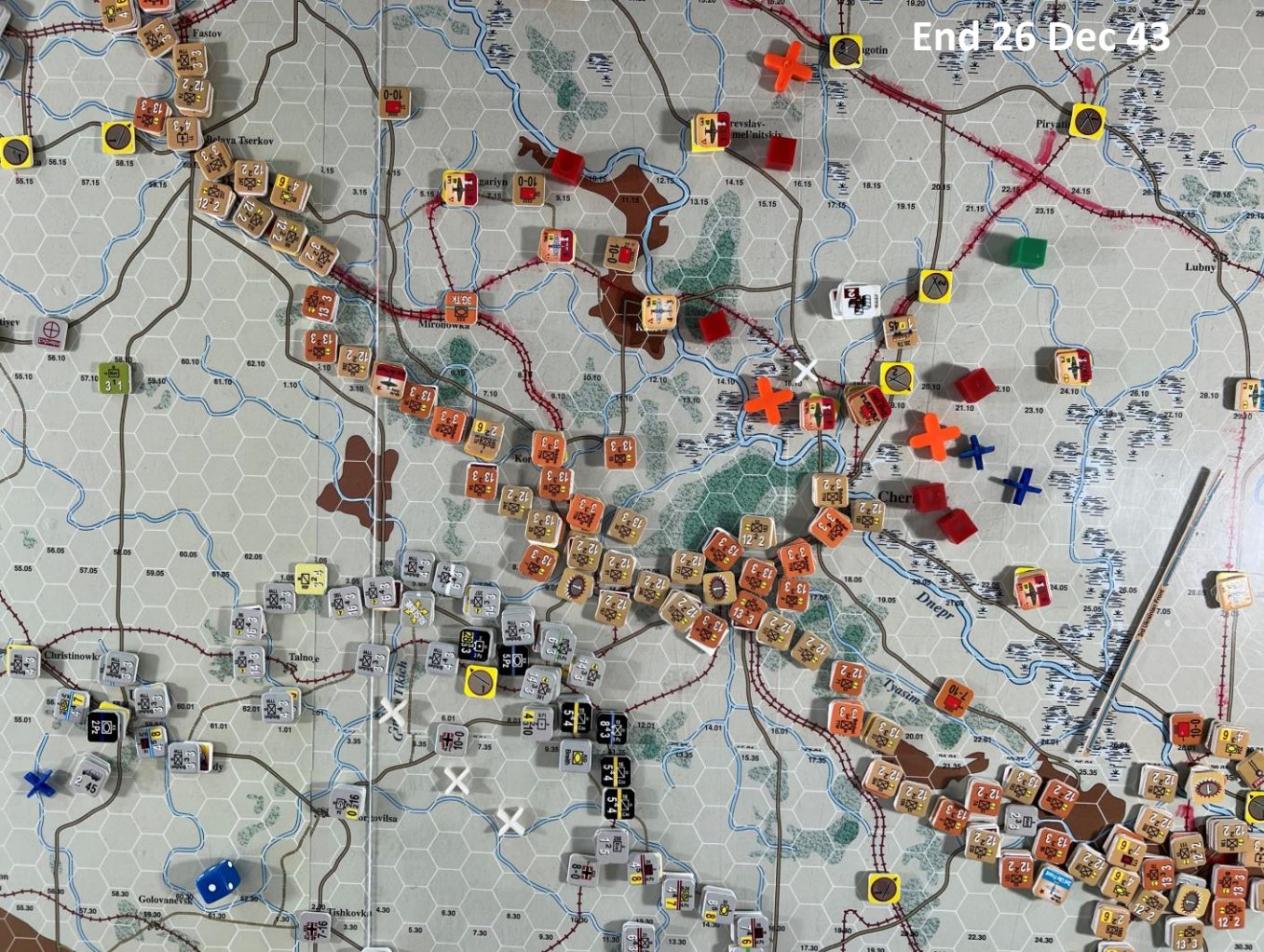
- Here is a good example of an under-appreciated tactic: the humble Trainbusting/Interdiction mission.
- The Soviets are planning attacks at the two DG markers (placed by Air Barrages). They know their opponent, and the high likelihood of Axis mobile formations, Kampfgruppen, and Reserves lurking in Zhitomir (the city is just south of the German 4 Pz Army HQ). Those panzers are warming their engines and greasing their tank treads preparatory to rushing along the roads and reinforcing the hexes under attack.
- How to disrupt this effort? One method would be Air Barrages against suspected Reserve stacks, hoping for a DG—sometimes that works, but we think there are several stacks to deal with.
- But the Trainbusting/Interdiction mission can help here. Air missions are flown one after the other, and Soviet Pe.2 bombers have a Barrage value of 5, which yields a 50% Trainbusting Zone result. And there are a lot of those bombers! With good dice rolls, it took 7 missions to generate 5 markers that ensured no Axis units with 7 or 8 MA (the fleetest Axis unit is 16 MA in Move mode) could reach the front lines.
- Results of the barrage/attacks/exploit are shown to the right—one group pocketed and another endangered. The Germans won the initiative roll for the next turn and opted to “skedaddle” to the west.
- An important factor is that the Luftwaffe has conceded the airspace over the front lines—any air units based within range of the Soviet VVS are swarmed and bombed every chance possible. So, they pulled back and try to get local air superiority to support specific operations.





29 Dec 43 1st Ukrainian Front

- 1st Ukrainian Front finished the liberation of Kiev on Christmas Day and is now redeploying the assault forces forward. The Axis has either chosen or been forced to go first every turn in December, which limits their appetite for counteroffensives. On 1 Jan 44, Korosten (A50.34) becomes a Soviet supply source, reflecting the advance of the 1st Belorussian Front north of the play area.
- The Axis players have taken note of the Soviet strategy to attack where the panzers aren't. They did an inventory of their units during the Soviet move and realized they have 59 Mech steps (panzer or PG), 203 Infantry steps (motorized or regular infantry) and 38 Other steps (HQ, artillery, AA, etc.). Their concern is that they will run out of units before the Spring Thaw. The Soviets will help this cascading crisis as much as they can.
- Not trying to engage panzers doesn't mean we aren't ready for it! There are 10 Tank/Mech Corps in this photo, but they are camera-shy (and tank-buster shy). Come out and play any time!



26 and 29 Dec 43, 2nd Ukrainian Front

- The Axis players know their defenses at Kremenchug and Cherkassy are about to be outflanked, having kept a careful eye on the busy Soviet Pontoon units as they repair bridges on the lower Dnepr. They have been peeling away from the river as part of their Great Skedaddle Plan.
- 2nd Ukrainian Front sees no reason to go on Offensive Posture until they catch up with the Axis forces, so most of their SP is routed to 1st Ukrainian. 2nd Ukr focuses on moving infantry forward, clearing out delay units and converting rail lines. The Axis plans to fight to the last Alert unit—oh, wait, they just come back via Replacement rolls so their endless renewal makes them perfect for Fortress garrisons.
- The southern Axis commander takes a different approach to Operational Security. He advertises the presence of panzer formations, daring the Soviets to tangle. We will, but we are making haste carefully.



26 and 29 Dec 43, 3rd Ukrainian Front

- 3rd Ukrainian found that the 4th time was the charm when it came to liberating Dneprodzerzhisk, which inflicted at least three AL2 results (attacking while in Regrouping Posture is permitted, but its often painful!)
- No need to move forward in Combat Mode—as there are only a few rear-guard “speed bump” units in the area. It will still be a few turns before they come into contact with the Axis main body again.
- The Axis players have also been studying the Victory conditions. The Soviets avoided VP penalties (by capturing Poltava on time, clearing the Nikopol area and pushing all Axis units off the Dnepr. But the Soviets only just gained their first VPs with the capture of Kiev. Their next objectives are Odessa, Uman, Vinnitsa and Tarnopol—and that will just obtain a Draw. The Soviets need in addition to force the surrender of Rumania, get to a west or southwest map edge or destroy an Axis Army/Army Group HQ to win. It’s a white-knuckled ride for both sides, where the Axis is managing ever-dwindling forces and the Soviets feel the pressure to advance—just what you want in an OCS game!

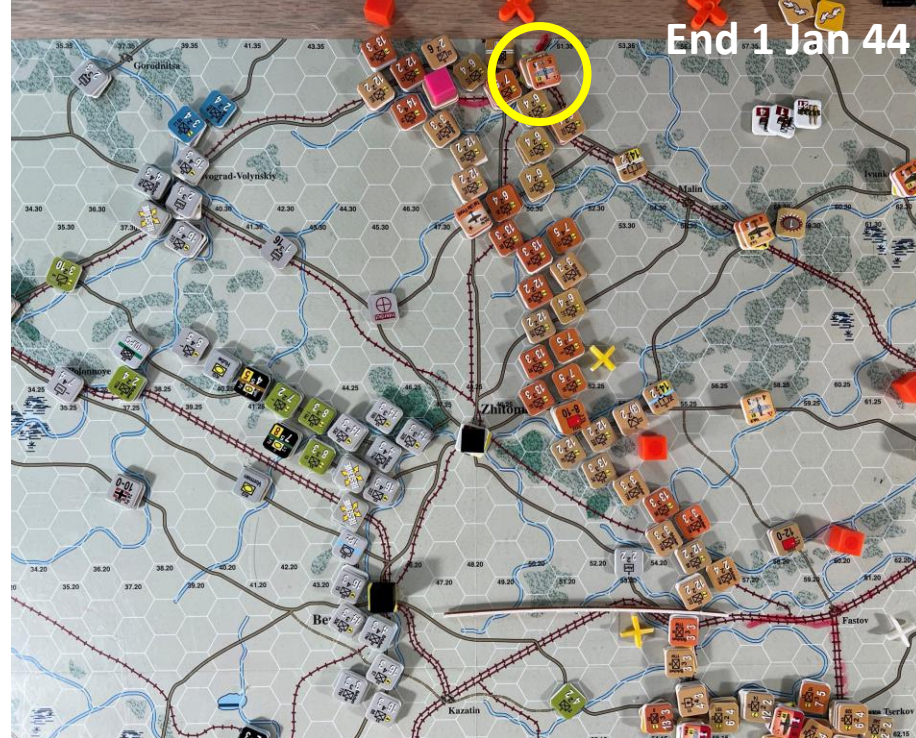
19-29 Dec 43 4th Ukrainian Front

- Here is some dramatic time-lapse footage of the 4th Ukrainian Front's advance into the Dnepr bend. Once the river reached "Freeze", Soviet forces could surround and eventually destroy the Axis Fortress cities blocking the roads and rail lines. These delaying forces enabled the bulk of their units to withdraw to their new defensive line at the Bug River, but it also unhinged the Kremenchug and Cherkassy defensive lines where 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts have been battling for months.
- The red lines drawn on the plexiglass are converted rail lines, and most of the Soviet RR units are deployed here, relaying track as fast as possible.
- The 4th Ukrainian went into "Regrouping" mode on 22 Dec, a much safer way to advance over favorable tank country when approaching Panzers.



1-8 Jan 1944 1st Ukrainian Front

- The 1st Ukrainian Front changed to Regrouping Posture 1 Jan 1944 and relocated the Front HQ to Korosten (the yellow circle). Korosten becomes a supply source and converts to Soviet gauge rail on this turn.
- The Soviets continue to advance, following up as the Axis units withdraw. It looks like they are establishing a defense in front of the key rail intersection at Shepetovka (orange circle). Three Panzer divisions are visible southeast of Shepetovka, and we suspect several others are lurking nearby.
- The open terrain south of Shepetovka is the clear path to Tarnopol. This is where the Axis probably likely plans to obliterate advancing Soviets with their panzers. The 1st Ukrainian Front can go on Offensive Posture starting next turn, but thus far the defensive benefits of Regrouping Posture is serving as the best shield against this nefarious Axis design.
- Fronts in Regrouping Posture may not spend more than 2 SP to put units in Attack Supply and attacks suffer a -2 AR penalty. This was still sufficient to allow the 1st Ukrainian to attack and capture Zhitomir (red circle), which had been declared a Fortress—fortunately so, as Soviet Regrouping Front attacks have earned a number of AL2 results thus far in the game.





1-8 Jan 1944 2nd Ukrainian Front

- The evolving Axis strategy is to withdraw to the Hills/Rough terrain of the Carpathian foothills. They have read the Victory conditions carefully: they can win if the Soviets only capture Kiev (already recaptured), Uman and Vinnitsa. If the Soviets take Odessa and Tarnopol the game is a draw. If they go on to exit units off the west edge, force Rumania to surrender or exit units off the southwest edge then the Soviets win (there are some other potential VPs that can be earned).



- Vinnitsa (orange circle) and Uman (yellow circle) are within reach. The Axis determined that Uman wasn't defensible, stacked a swarm of "garbage" units, SP and declared it a Fortress. They expect it will hold out for 3-4 turns. It isn't clear whether they will make Vinnitsa into a similar roadblock or if there are more Panzer divisions lurking in the area.
- The Axis "leave a hole we hope the Soviets stick their head in" strategy is forced on them by the force ratios on the map. They have less than half the number of steps as the Soviets. If they made a straight line of units across the map, the Axis could only have 3-4 steps per hex. They cannot mass any substantial counterattack force without leaving big gaps in the line. They no longer have the Dnepr River as a shield and hope to use the difficult terrain along the Dnestr River as their final barrier before the game ends in April 1944.

1-8 Jan 1944 3rd Ukrainian Front

- 3rd Ukrainian Front is chasing Axis units which are withdrawing as fast as they can advance (they are in Regrouping Posture). They have come a long way from Cherkassy just 9 turns ago (the Dnepr is just visible in the upper right of the 8 Jan 44 photo).
- The Axis is getting back to the Hill and Rough terrain (the darker brown is Rough), as well as positioning behind the Bug River. But Uman (yellow circle) is going to take some battering before it goes down (the stack is at least 8 units tall).
- Don't fret for those poor SS Cavalry units, who look like they are being assimilated by the Borg in the 1 Jan 44 photo. They are withdrawn per the OOA on 5 Jan, so they magically vanish from encirclement (nor were the Soviets fooled into attacking them).
- Even moving forward in Regrouping Posture, Soviet units are careful to stack with anti-tank units. They are also careful to hide any armor units on the front line under infantry to avoid visits from German tank busters!

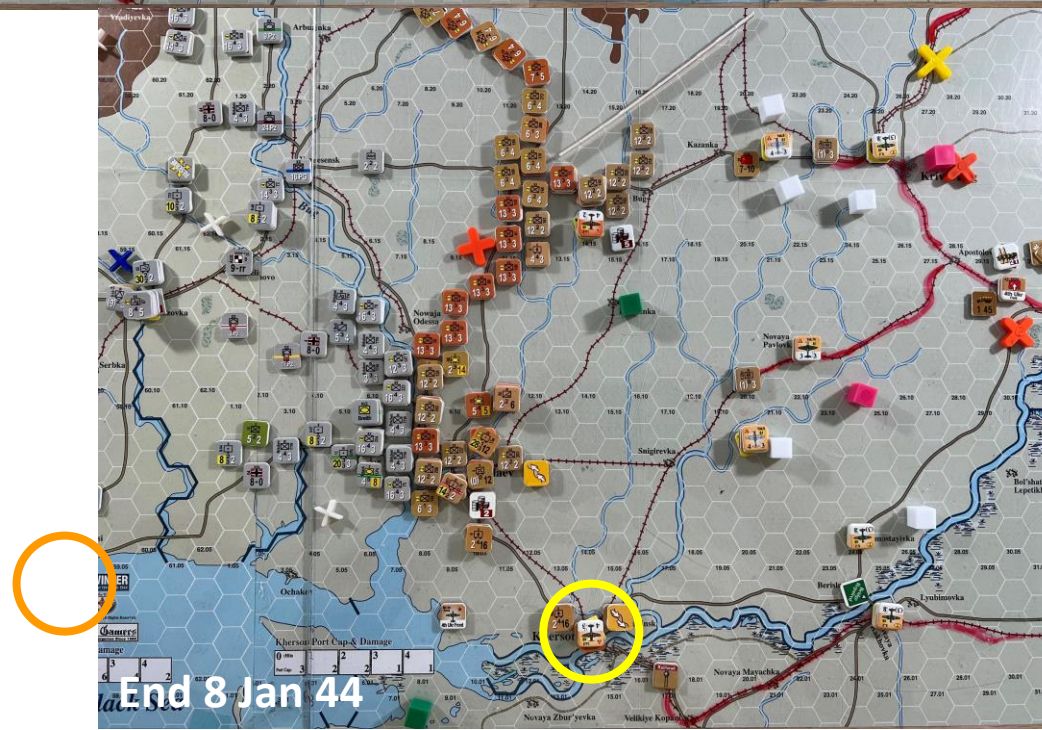


End 5 Jan 44



1-8 Jan 1944 4th Ukrainian Front

- This was the only Front on Offensive Posture during these turns. Once it captured Kherson (yellow circle), the Front pressed on to capture Nikolaev (red circle).
- During the 8 Jan 44 turn, attacks across the Bug River killed 5 Axis infantry steps, but panzer counterattacks eliminated the bridgehead.
- The next objective is Odessa, which is just out of the photo (orange circle). Four significant Rivers and Estuaries need to be crossed, but the terrain is all open and vulnerable to Soviet artillery.



Left to right: Tony Birkett, David Glantz, Curtis Baer, Chip Saltsman



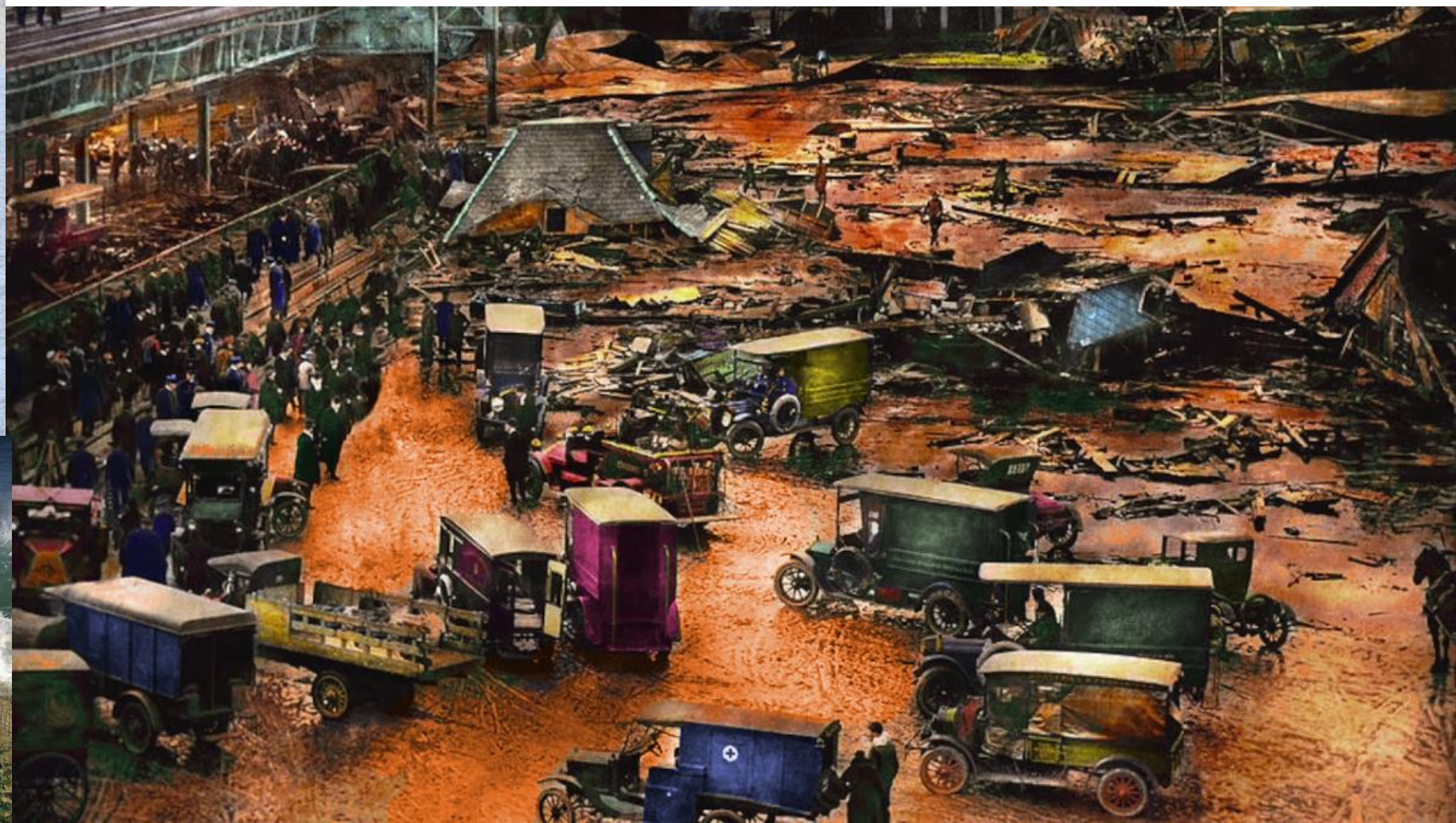
Sidebar: Meeting Colonel David Glantz

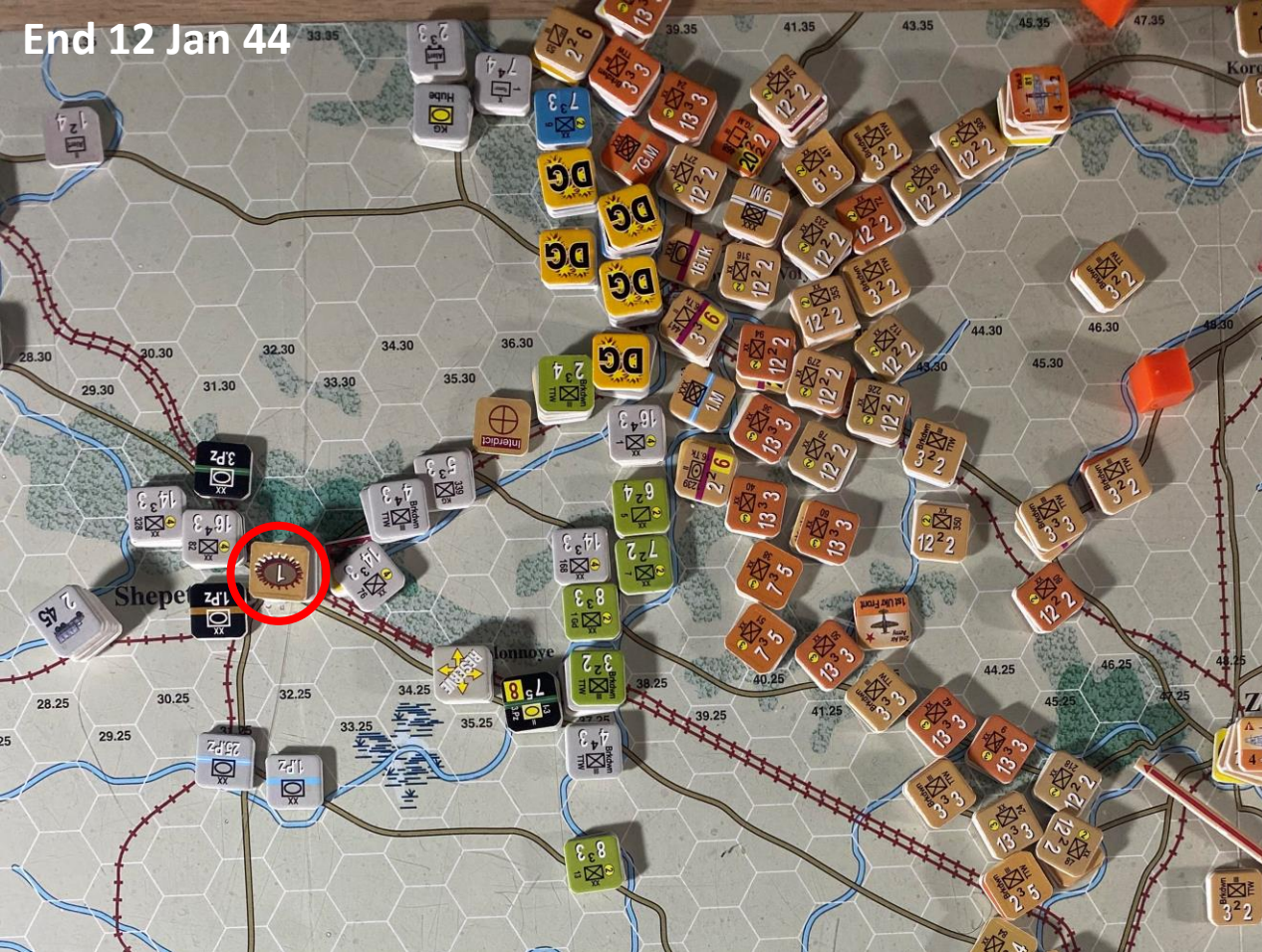
- Team *Third Winter* traveled to Carlisle, PA at this point as we arrange a meeting with noted East Front historian David Glantz. We were there to better understand how the Soviet Front system operated and its evolution over the later stages of the conflict.
- Glantz confirmed, for example, how the Front boundaries could shift radically—"I can show you orders where they moved entire armies between Fronts on a regular basis."
- While the Soviets were very good at tracking Axis panzer formations, the German intelligence services were continually losing track of the Soviets and being surprised when "strong tank formations" appeared.
- The Soviet's operational capability for mobile warfare "leveled up" just after Kursk and again in the spring of 1944. By 1945 they had perfected the "Deep Battle" and it remained their approach until the fall of the Soviet Union.
- Fronts which were "Regrouping" erected colossal defensive zones quickly, and often send a large proportion of their units to Fronts which were actively fighting.
- Glantz could not have been more helpful or accommodating. It was a real honor to spend a morning with him.



The Great Molasses Flood of 1919

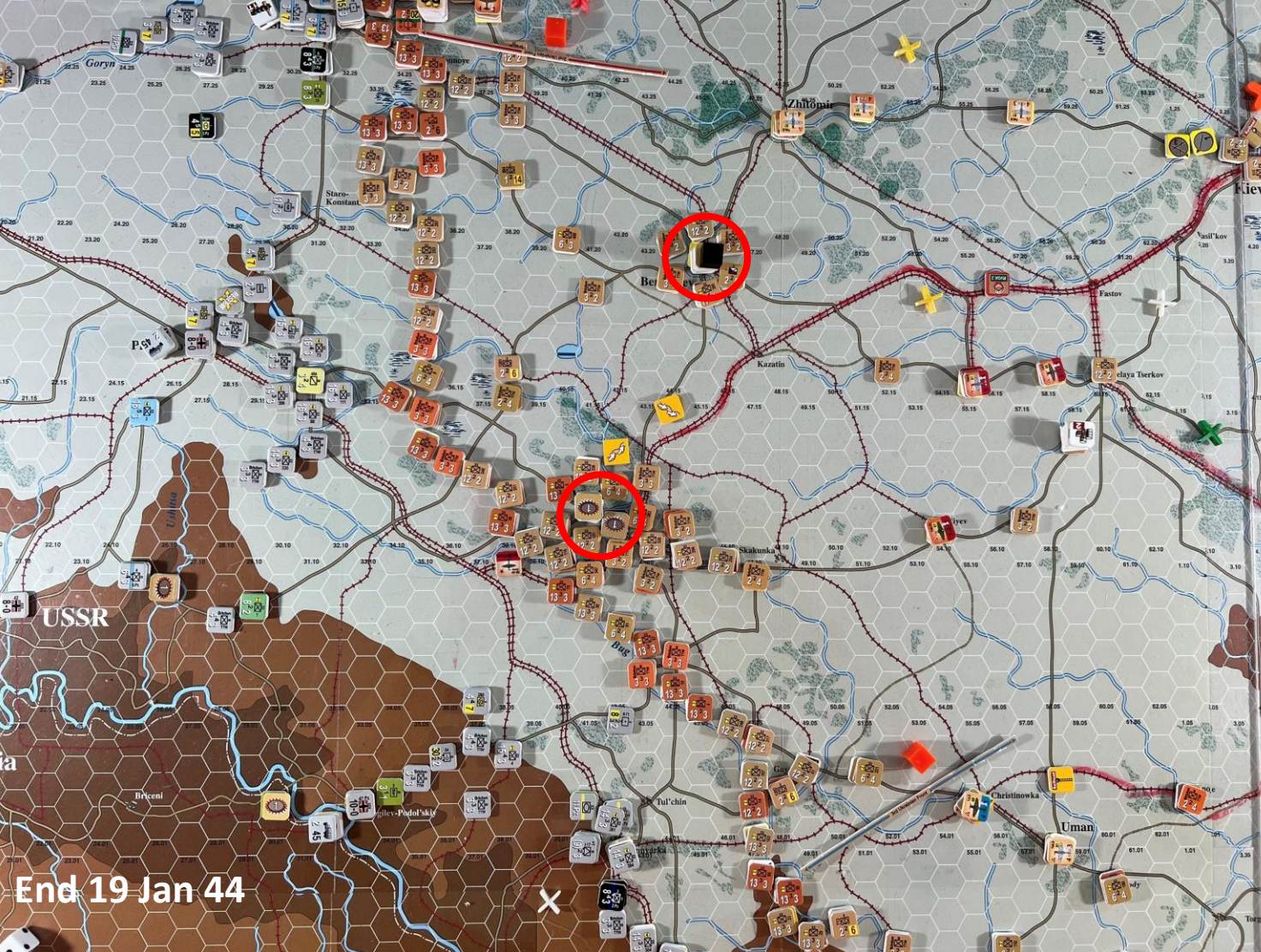
- I have been searching for the right metaphor to describe the inexorable Soviet advance across Ukraine in The Third Winter. “Russian Steamroller” has been overused. A Zamboni doesn’t leave a trail of disaster behind it. A tidal wave is horrible, but eventually recedes. But on a January day in 1919 in the city of Boston, a storage tank containing 2.3 million gallons of molasses (8700 cubic meters), or 13,000 tons, burst open. The wave of sludge was several meters high and traveled faster than people could run. Entire buildings were swept off their foundations and 21 people were killed. The sticky mess took weeks to clean up and residents claim the area smelled like molasses for decades.
- What a perfect piece of mental imagery for Soviet players to contemplate as they look to swamp their opponent under a tide of brown and orange!





12 to 19 Jan 44, 1st Ukrainian Front

- The 1st Ukrainian Front switched to Offensive Mode on 12 Jan 44, having relocated its Front HQ to Korosten (you can just see the “Kor” in the upper right of the 12 Jan photo). This location became a Soviet supply source and railhead on 1 Jan 44. The next major objective for the onrushing tide of Molasses sludge is Shepetovka, marked with a red circle. Shepetovka is a road/rail junction in a thicket of woods, which limits throw range—you pretty much have to have it to advance much further.
- Note the use of Interdiction markers to delay potential counterattack routes.
- The Axis figured out Shepetovka’s importance – they can read a map – and have put some significant force in the area. Also note the gathering group on the north edge of the map. They are lining up to protect Rovno, which turns into a Soviet supply source/railhead on 5 Feb 44. Having seen the jump forward to Korosten, they plan to anchor their defense here.



12 to 19 Jan 44, 2nd Ukrainian Front

- The 2nd Ukrainian Front remained on Regrouping Posture but followed the retreating Axis units as fast as possible. The Axis, who are pulling back into better defensive terrain, had concluded Vinnitsa was not defensible, despite its 2 VP value. The Molasses Sludge oozed around it (red circle) as well as Berdichev (red circle with a black cube on it).
- We will see how far the Axis plans to pull back. Note that Regrouping Posture is the safest way to cross open ground when there is the probable presence of Panzers!



End 12 Jan 44



End 19 Jan 44

12 to 19 Jan 44, 3rd Ukrainian Front

- The 3rd Ukrainian Front oozed its molasses sludge blob past Uman (red circle) in Regrouping Posture. This location is also worth 2 VP, so the Front changed to Offensive Posture on 15 Jan 44 and cleared the city in just a turn or two. It is just as well, since the Axis is looking like they have reached ground they plan to defend.
- Clearing a city, which is usually packed with six battalions (6 steps that are only 3 RE) requires sequencing attacks in the Combat and Exploit Phases, and positioning units that can do multiple overruns into the hex once the defensive strength gets lower.



12 to 19 Jan 44, 4th Ukrainian Front

- The 4th Ukrainian Front was a bit surprised that the Axis retreated from the major river line of the Bug River. But the rule for Molasses Sludge is to ooze forward until it reaches a structure it can't flow around. This was finally the case at the next large estuary. What is hopefully an irresistible mound of molasses is piling up but is held in check by several panzer divisions—note the presence of Grossdeutschland, 3rd Panzer and 16th PG there to stem the tide (and those are just the ones we can see).

Third Winter “Checkpoint” on 26 Jan 1944

- Comrade Stalin has data from an alternate reality, so he has summoned the Soviet commanders to Moscow for a review of our *Third Winter* Campaign game to date.
- First, let’s compare the force structures in our game versus the *Third Winter* Scenario 2 of the same date. We did some painstaking step-counting to see how well both sides were doing.
- Its important to note the biggest differences in on-map strategy. The Axis forces have been executing a staged withdrawal to the Hills/Rough terrain in the west of the map since the Dnepr began to freeze. Their “Great Skedaddle” started departing the Dnepr Bend near Zaporozhe around the 26 Nov 1943 turn, compared to the historical withdrawal in February/March 1944. The Soviets really only caught up to them now. The Axis commanders have written off 6 VP (Kiev, Uman and Vinnitsa) and decided they could not hold on long enough to get VP for having a Nikolaev bridgehead or having units on the Dnepr. 6 VP is an Axis win. The next available VP are Odessa and Tarnopol, which they plan to defend like cornered rats.
- Another strategy has been to avoid engagement with the Soviet air force. Axis aircraft are all based well out of range of Air Base barrage (after some painful experiences). When they want to blast a Soviet Front they Fighter Sweep all Soviet defenses and swarm in.
- Looking at the numbers, the Soviets are about 50 steps ahead of their historical counterparts, particularly in Infantry and Mech (these units haven’t had to fight Axis forces yet). But the Axis is seriously understrength in Mech, as they have a lot of AG units and Panzers in the dead pile.
- Both sides have been careful to manage their Dead Piles, and its common to find soon-to-be-withdrawn units leading attacks. The Soviets have also used the RVGK boxes as rapid-transfer tools to move Tank/Mech Corps, Artillery Divisions and other mobile units between Fronts.
- Stalin’s overall message: Good job, but to win you must move fast and smite the evil invaders!

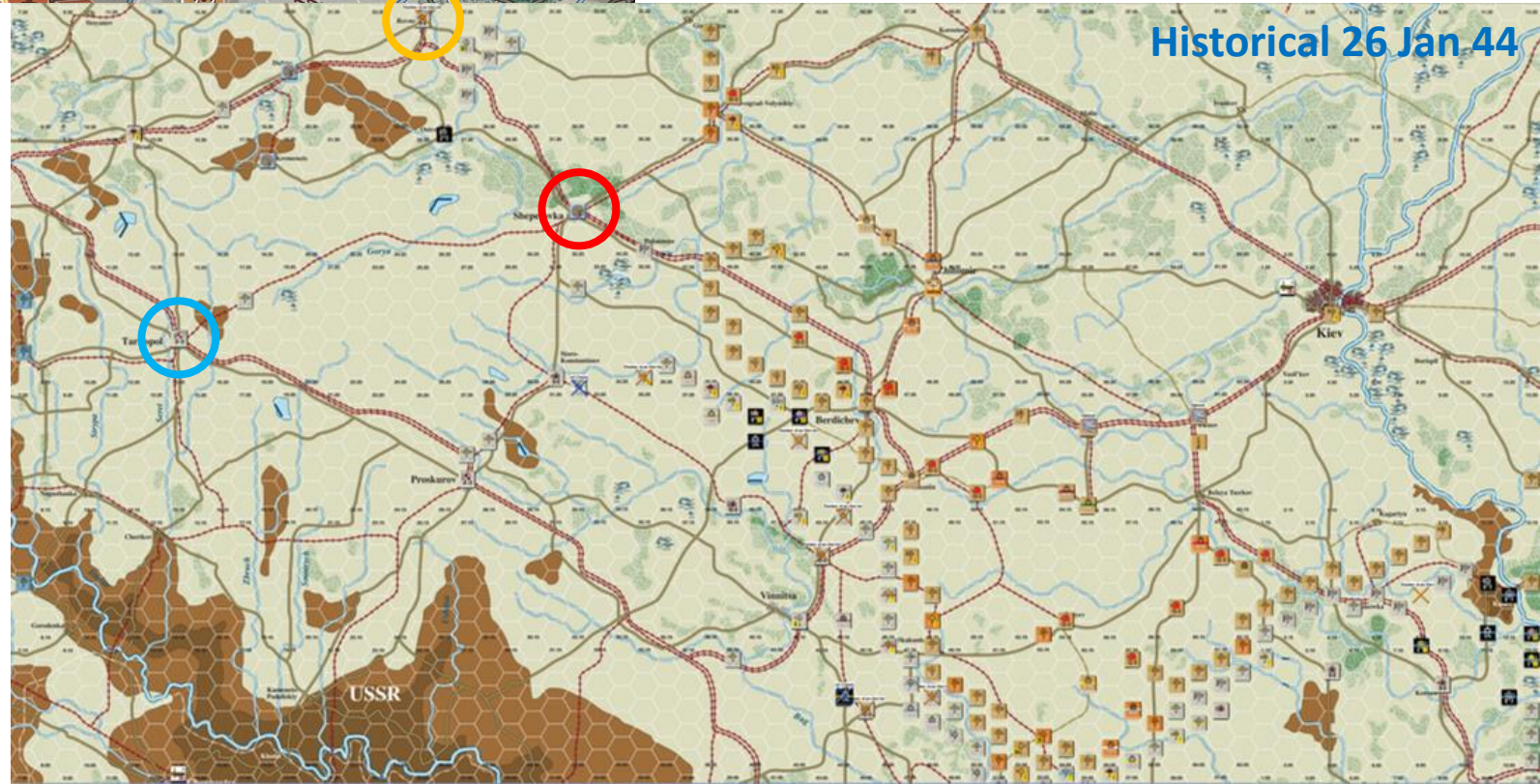
Third Winter Force Analysis

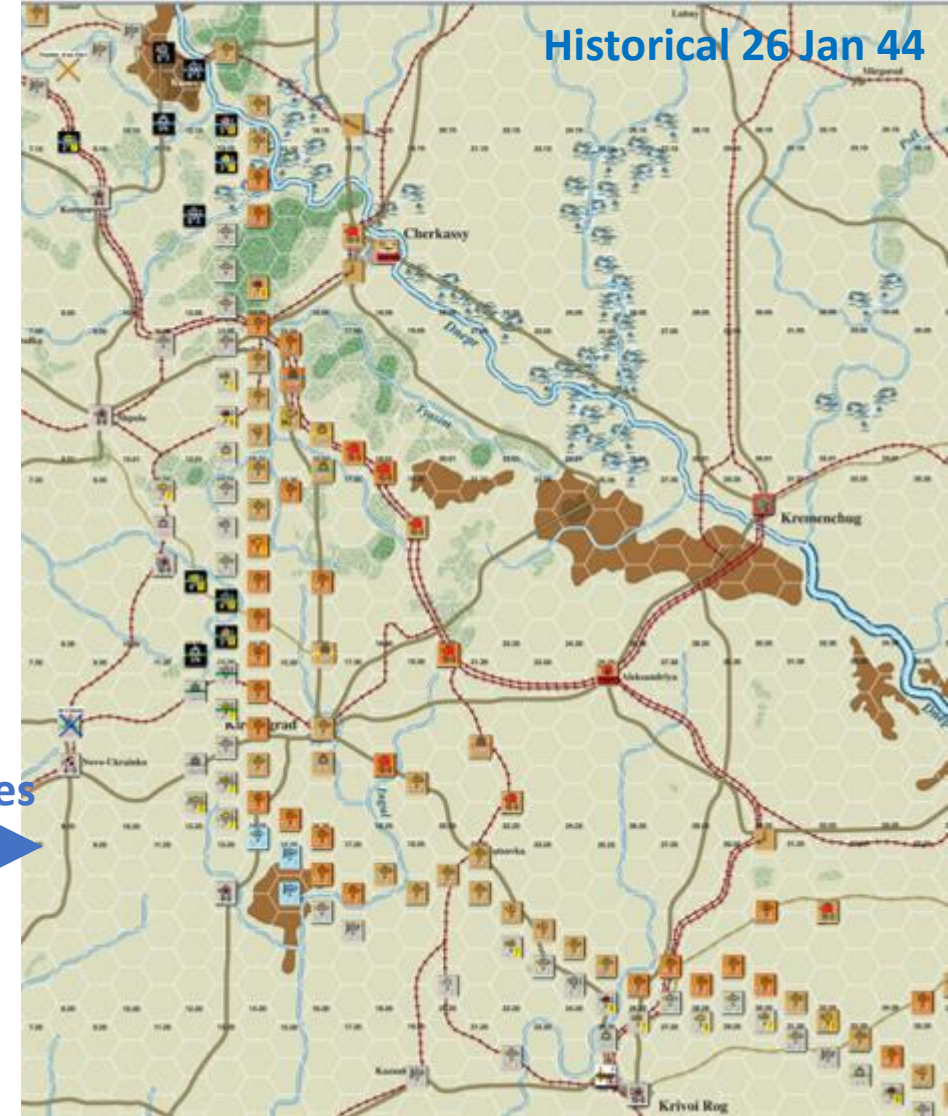
	Scenario 2 Start			Current Game	
	Axis	Soviet		Axis	Soviet
Steps on map					
Mech (Red/Yellow box)	93	88		66	121
Infantry (Other)	235	410		237	456
Non-Attack Capable	96	174		86	150
Total Steps	424	672		389	727
Fighter Steps	25	64		28	58
Bomber Steps	23	56		26	71
Transport	5	8		5	8
Total	53	128		59	137
Dead Pile					
Mech	25	34		20	19
Infantry	42	5		62	27
Non-Attack Capable	4	4		18	0
Fighter	4	4			6
Bomber	10	4			0
Transport	2	0			0
RVGK Box					
Mech (Red/Yellow box)		33			12
Infantry		24			14
Non-Attack Capable		19			24
Total		76			50



26 Jan 1944 Turn Start, 1st Ukrainian Front

- Historically, the 1st Ukrainian Front was stretched in a wide arc, ready to participate in the Korsun Pocket battle. The units in the north are tied in with the advancing off-map Byelorussian Front.
- Our game has a much more concentrated 1st Ukr Front and is pressing hard on Shepetovka (red circle), Rovno (orange circle, becomes a Soviet supply source/converted rail on 5 Feb 44) with Tarnopol (blue circle) in its ultimate sights.
- The Front is ahead of its historical schedule, but the Axis has built two Panzer Force islands to defend Tarnopol. The path from Shepetovka (once captured) to Tarnopol is through Open Terrain, but the northern menacing jaw of their intended trap has been assembling in the Rovno area, ready to make mayhem on the flanks of an advancing force.





11 hexes



26 Jan 1944 Turn Start, 2nd Ukrainian Front

- This Front is significantly ahead of its historical counterparts (since the Great Skedaddle took place earlier than the historical Axis). They have surrounded Berdichev (orange circle) and Vinnitsa's (red circle) stay-behind Fortresses but will probably need to go on Offensive Posture to complete their liberation.
- 2nd Ukrainian's role is also to guard 1st Ukrainian's flank against the southern menacing jaw of the Axis panzer trap. We believe that is the group assembling near Proskurov (they are hiding under the innocent looking Ost unit and its nearby friends). South of all this the Rough terrain and Dnestr River make for a difficult advance. The blue circles indicate two of the few rail crossings over the Dnestr, and the diligent Axis are already fortifying them.
- One challenge of advancing in Regrouping Posture in Open Terrain is that you better be ready to fend off those panting Panzers when you do finally go on Offense!



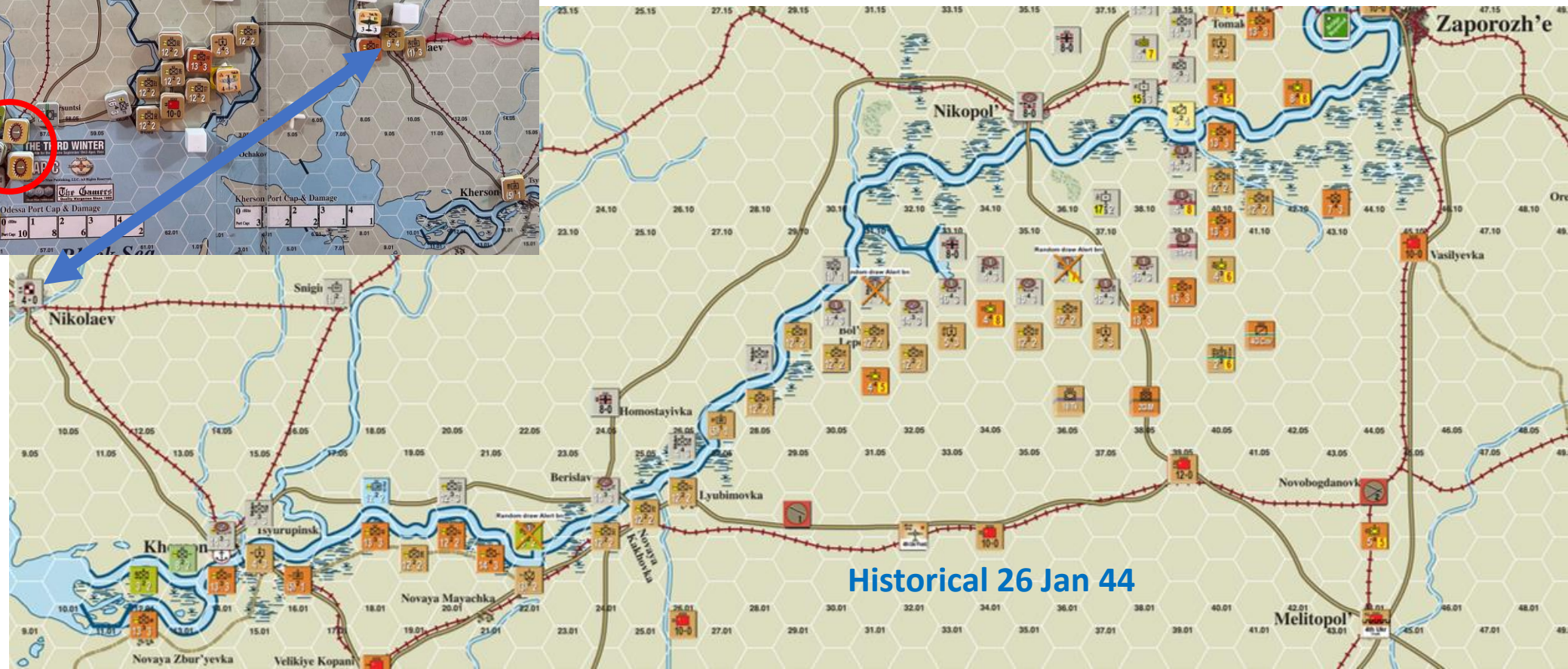
26 Jan 1944 Turn Start, 3rd Ukrainian Front

- This is the Front FAR ahead of its historical counterpart. Having captured Uman (red circle) they have advanced to the Carpathian foothills where the Axis defenses await. The blue circle shows the third Dnestr rail crossing, already guarded.
- This Front is just going on Regrouping posture to allow another Front to have a go at the Axis forces.



26 Jan 1944 Turn Start, 4th Ukrainian Front

- Another Front ahead of history. Rather than defend the Open Terrain behind the Dnestr, the Axis has set up behind an estuary where there are only a few hexes of Open . . . and those have panzers aplenty.
- The prize in front of the 4th Ukrainian is Odessa (historically liberated on 10 April 1944) but getting there will be no easy task.



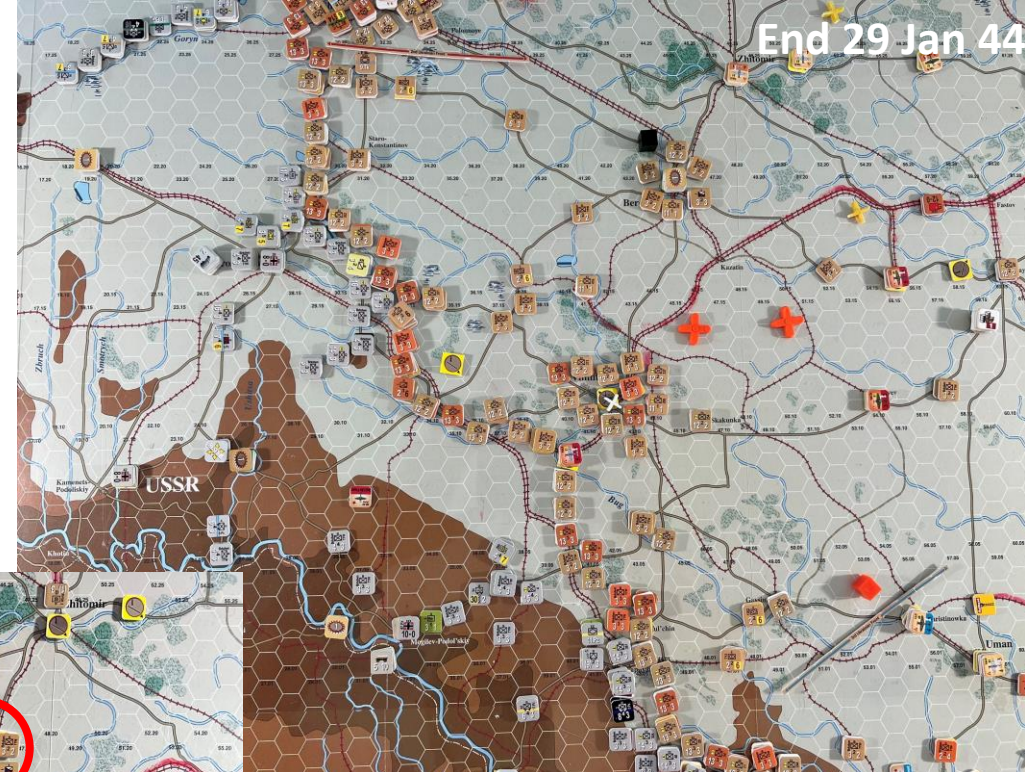


- One other interesting element—as the Soviets approach the western board edge, the Axis air bases will come into Soviet air barrage range. The Luftwaffe has declined to go toe-to-toe with the VVS for months and we are looking forward to pummeling them again!

1 Feb 1944, 1st Ukrainian Front

- When the 1st Ukrainian went on Offensive Posture 12 Jan 44, they were 8 hexes east of Shepetovka. Now they are 7 hexes west of that city, having oozed forward 2-3 hexes per turn over 7 turns. They have reached the limit of their logistical net and will go on Regrouping Posture next turn to move up the Front HQ, reset Army HQ locations and prepare for their next lunge.
- There is no mystery where they need to go: Tarnopol is the VP city directly in front of them. The Axis is defending by building two “rocks” of units housing panzer concentrations, while leaving an enticing clear terrain gap/trap between them. Should the Soviets march into the gap, the plan is for these upper and lower jaws to snap shut.
- We have been having quite a debate about the best way for the Soviets to manage their Front posture. Should each Front stay on Offensive Posture as long as possible, continually attacking? Or should they limit an Offense to 3 turns, and rapidly cycle through the different Fronts? When the Axis anticipates an attack, their panzers appear, so perhaps the best method is to frequently change – particularly as our Soviet strategy has been to destroy as many infantry steps as we can, running them out of units.



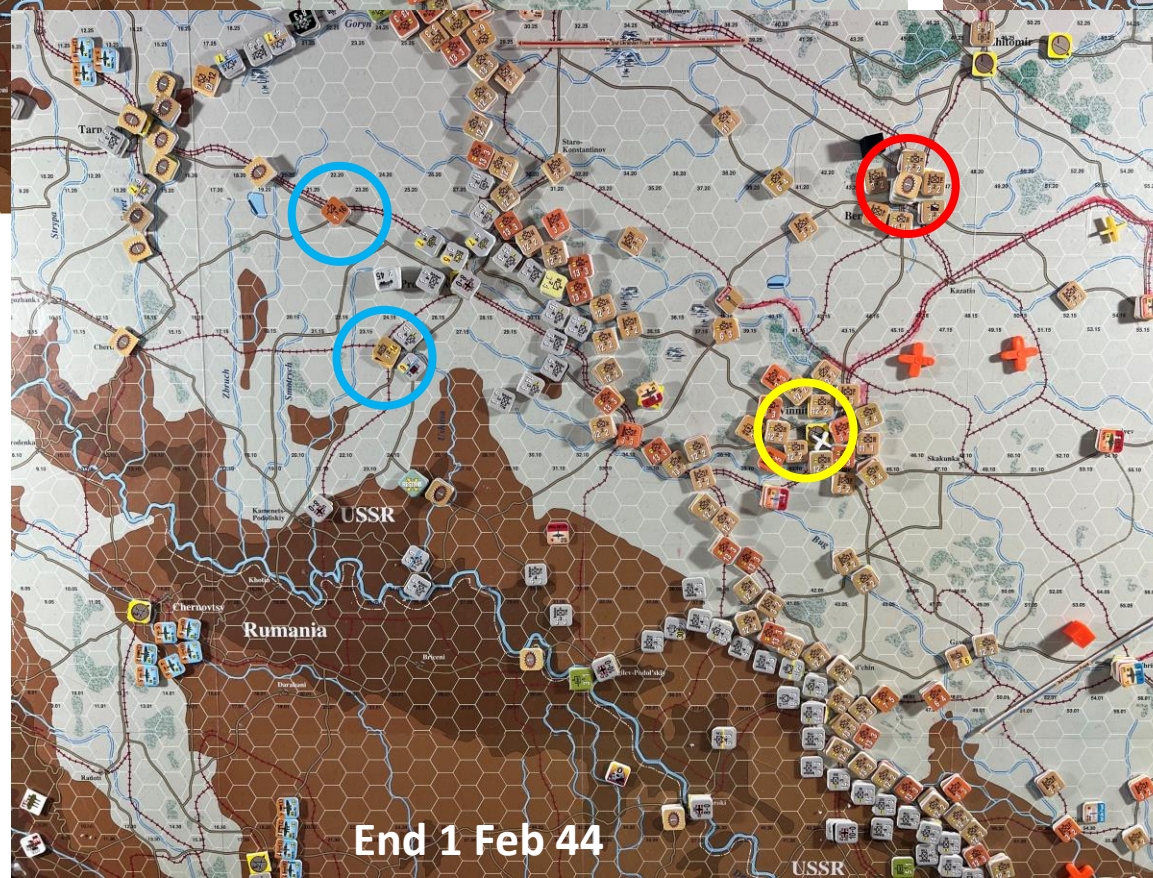


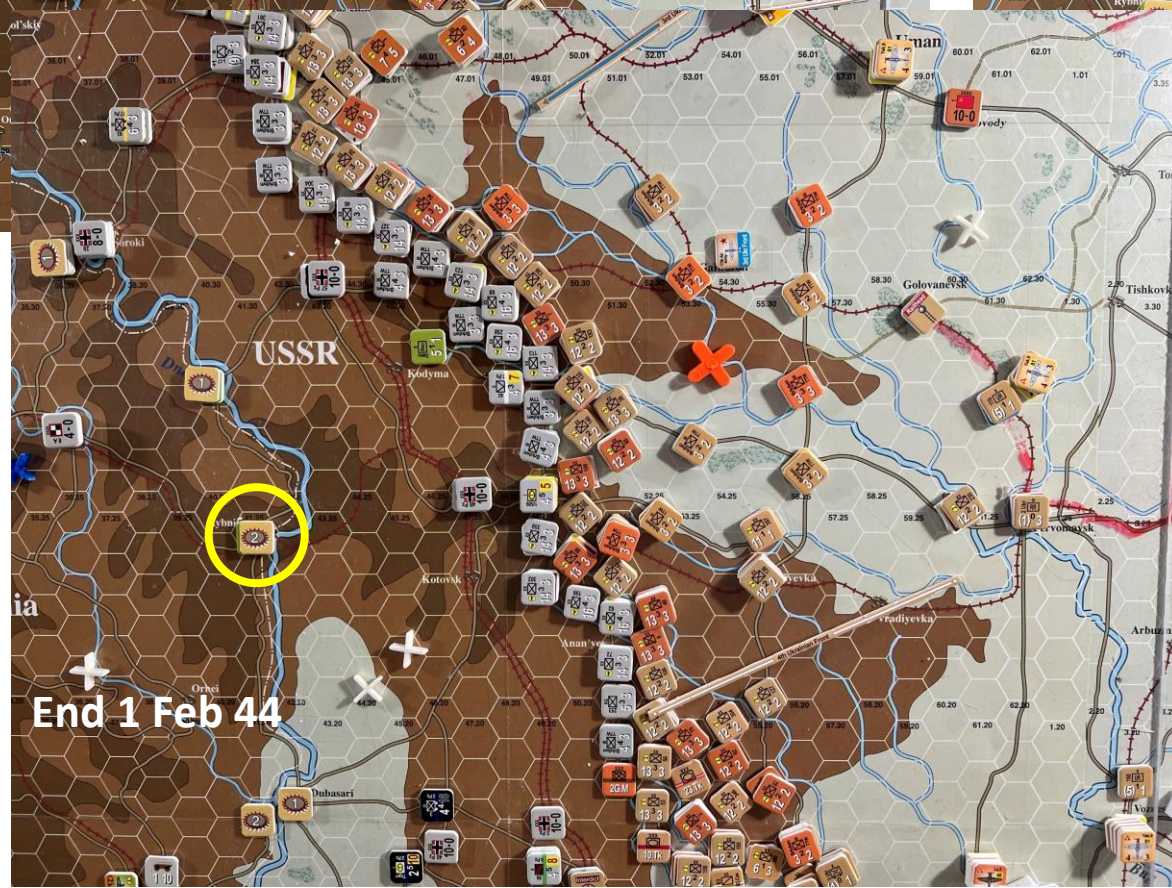
1 Feb 1944, 2nd Ukrainian Front

- This Front is likely to go on Offensive Posture next, as they have much to do. Berdichev (red circle) is surrounded and has been eating off the map, so they will expire from being Out of Supply . . . sometime. No need to spend SP assaulting there.
- Vinnitsa (yellow circle) is another matter. It is a two-hex city which has been declared a Fortress, has a Kessel

HQ and is probably crammed with “garbage” units (our opponents use Rumanians and free-replacements like Alert units). It will require several turns to assault. It is also worth 2 VP, so the assault needs to happen.

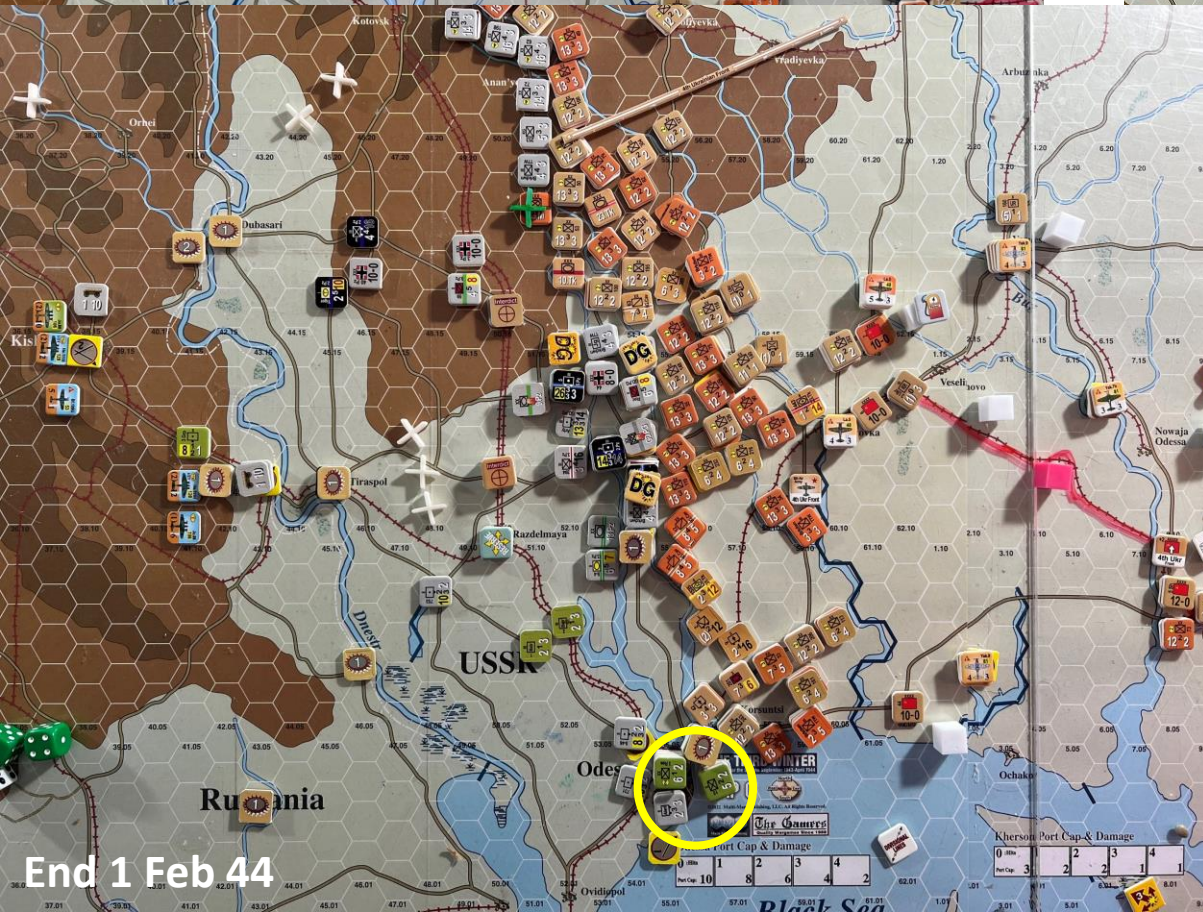
- In addition, the Front needs to push towards the Dnestr River and contend with the panzer concentration west of Vinnitsa. There is potential for the mother of all tank battles in the Open terrain.
- By the way, see the Soviet units marked with the blue circles? They look like raiders, but the more southern one had an entire Tank Corps. Had we won the initiative the next turn, they could have zipped to the board edge through unguarded hexes and gotten the Soviets 2 VP. Gamey? Maybe, but this was the next-to-last time we really wanted to win the initiative roll and didn’t get it.





1 Feb 1944, 3rd Ukrainian Front

- Well, this is a tough assignment. The 3rd Ukrainian Front has been on Regrouping Posture since it captured Uman. The way forward would be through all those Axis units in Hills/Rough terrain, to capture the only rail crossing over the Dnestr in its path (yellow circle, and there are only three rail crossings across this Major River on all of Map C). If they manage that, the objective would be the city of Iasi, which forces Rumanian surrender rolls.
- A real challenge for the Soviets at this point of our game is that there is no mystery where we need to go: Tarnopol and Odessa. They can concentrate units for defense of these areas and make the approaches to each city very difficult. And the game's victory conditions demand the Soviet player do better than their historical counterparts!



1 Feb 1944, 4th Ukrainian Front

- The lovely three-hex port city of Odessa calls like a 2 VP siren to the brave comrades of the 4th Ukrainian Front. To reach it, they have crossed the Dnepr, the Major River terrain of the Bug, and now must traverse several estuaries (impassible) and minor rivers in the face of determined defenders. Look closely at the photo to see the 2nd SS and 5th SS Panzer Divisions along with their little friend the Grossdeutschland PG Division, not to mention the 3rd, 9th and 13th Panzer Divisions. They have Rumanians fortifying away in Odessa proper. This hardly seems fair!
- Once interesting aspect of the “Freeze” weather conditions is that Infantry and Mech (red box) are x1 attacking across Minor Rivers, but Armor (yellow box) is halved. Since the Axis armor is nearly all yellow, the Minor Rivers are more benefit to the Soviets. The Axis players are contemplating retreating a hex to the open terrain so their counterattacks will be more potent—is there no end to their perfidy?!

End 5 Feb 44



End 8 Feb 44

8 Feb 1944, 1st Ukrainian Front

- First Ukrainian has been moving forward in Regrouping Posture as the Axis player fades backward in front of it. Regrouping Posture is a great “advance to contact” mechanism, particularly when there is clear terrain to cross. The trouble is that it has to switch to Offensive Posture in order to secure the map-edge shoulders.
- I have had the opportunity to play Third Winter with Tony Birkett’s next 4-map design, The Forgotten Battles. When those maps are added, and the First Belorussian Front advances just north of the map edge it can completely change this situation.



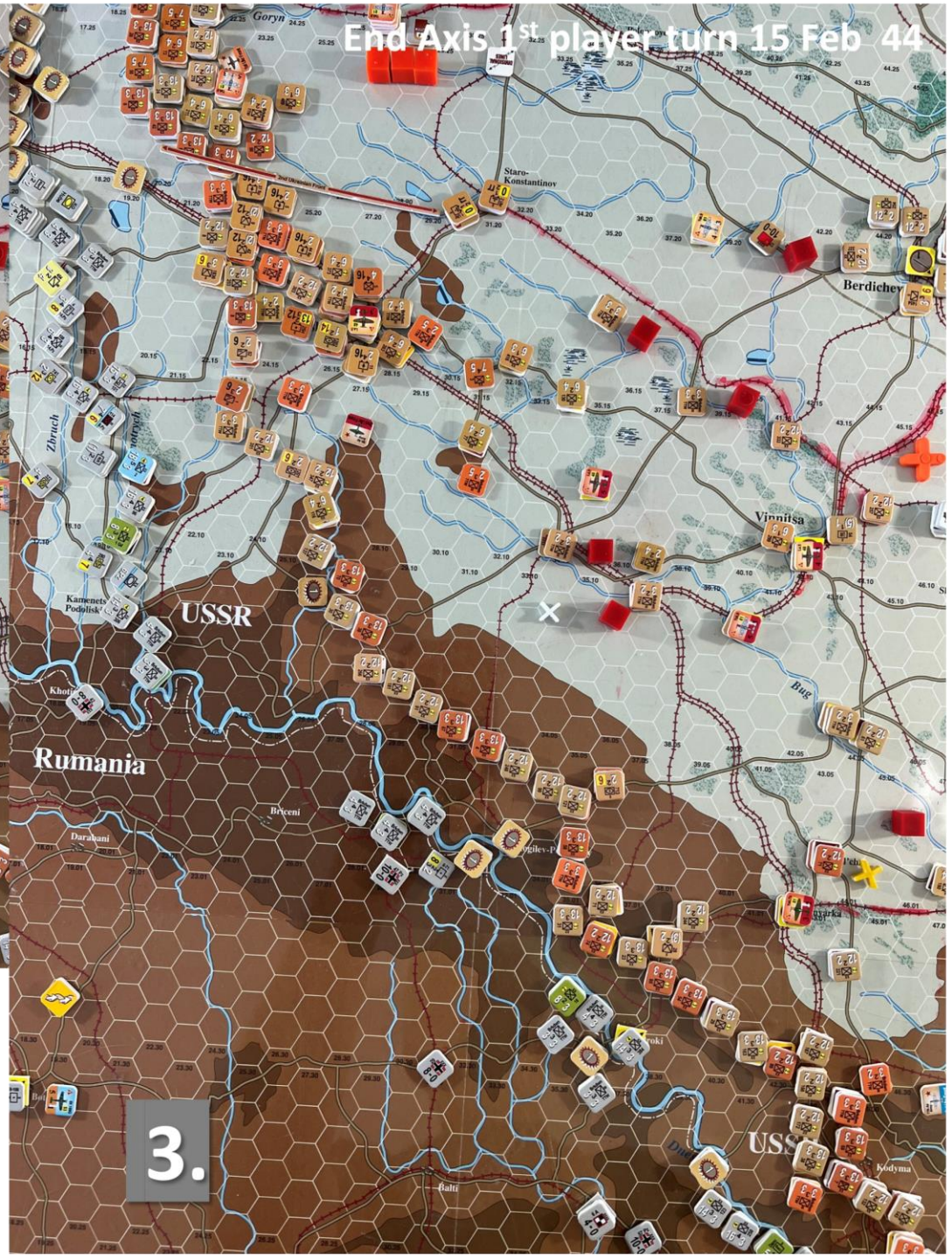
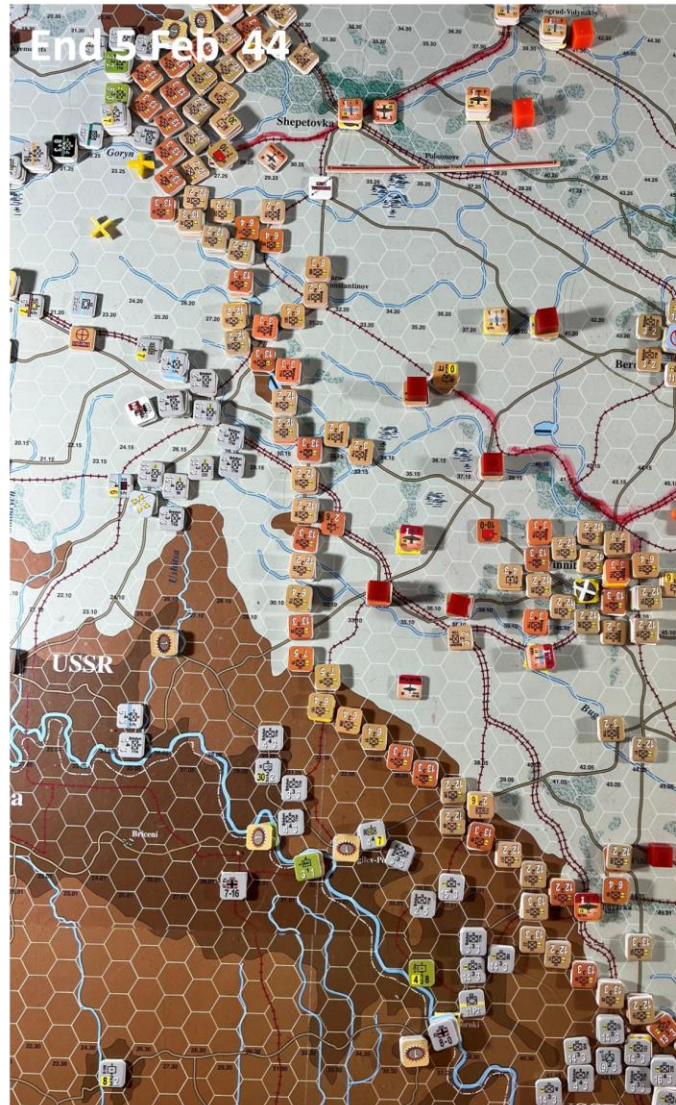
15 Feb 1944, 1st Ukrainian Front

- The Axis knows exactly what the Soviets need to capture, which is Tarnopol (it is under that Level-2 hog). They have resorted to their usual tactic when they know where we need to go, which is a wall of Panzer divisions, looking like their side getting ready for a rugby scrum. We haven't yet been able to go through one, so we need to look for ways around.
- You can see the scrum team forming up: at least five mobile divisions in the front line plus other formations lurking behind, I am sure.
- Fun fact: by this point of the war the Germans lost the ability to track Soviet mobile formations and were frequently surprised by their appearance. The Soviets kept close watch on Panzer divisions knew there whereabouts, except for the SS divisions, which they had difficulty with. Imagine if the Axis weren't allowed to hide formation markers!



15 Feb 1944, 2nd Ukrainian Front

- The big news here was very successful set of attacks on Vinnitsa, which cleared the city completely. Vinnitsa was more than 10 hexes behind the Front, which means it can be attacked without the Regrouping Front penalties. Fort Berdichev then succumbed to hunger after surviving a series of attrition rolls.
- Other than that, the main activity is preparing for the Tarnopol Operation.



15 Feb 1944, 2nd Ukrainian Front

- The big news here was a very successful set of attacks on Vinnitsa, which cleared the city completely. Fort Berdichev then succumbed to hunger after surviving repeated attrition rolls.
- Other than that, the main activity of the 2nd Ukrainian is to advance and prepare to support the Tarnopol Offensive Operation.



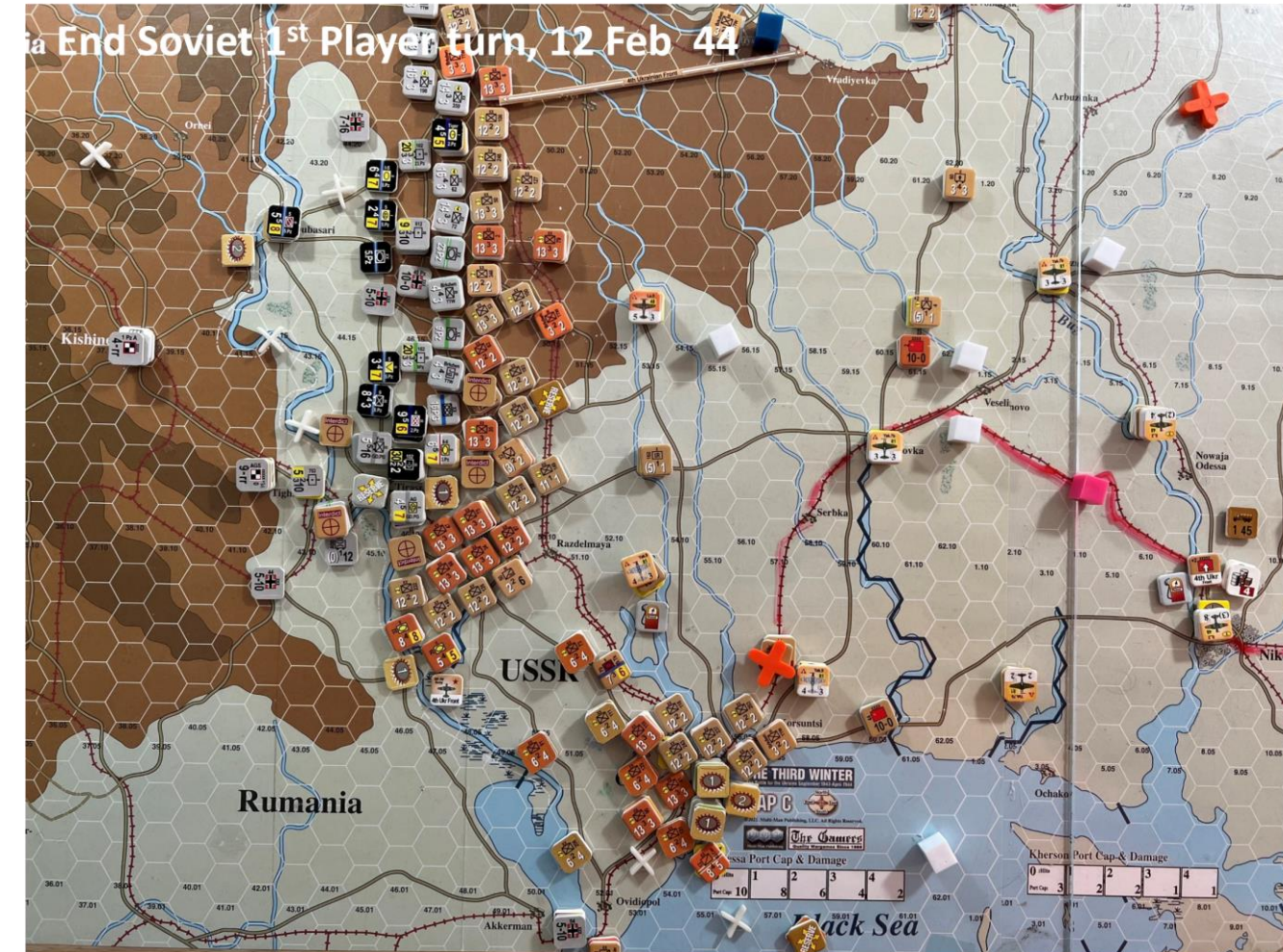
15 Feb 1944, 3rd Ukrainian Front

- The 3rd Ukrainian has mostly stayed in contact, as the Axis forces retreat to the Dniestr River line. Only a few rail lines cross this river, and far behind it lies Iasi, their ultimate goal.



8 Feb 1944, 4th Ukrainian Front

- The 4th Ukrainian is still on offense and preparing to assault Odessa (note the apartment building of units that await it!)
- At this point, my objective was to surround and begin the reduction of the Odessa fortress, which was well begun with the capture of the Level-2 Hog in C56.05. I needed to block those retreating Axis forces, and perhaps I could spring a surprise of my own with Pontoons over that ungaurded stretch of the Dniestr River! We lost the initiative roll and the Axis had us go first next turn.



12 Feb 1944, 4th Ukrainian Front

- My Soviet units assaulted the first hex of Odessa (C55.05) and were repulsed with AL2 results in both Combat and Exploit. But look carefully in the photo above, where I have several units on the Dnestr. There are pontoons under ever one of them, and I pushed 8 mobile corps into the area, all of them hiding under the infantry divisions near where the map says "USSR." I was ready to spring my trap. I had been well and truly suckered in.
- The Axis turn was ominous. It turns out THEY had moved a mass of Panzers to the area. Attacks against my front line killed or DG'd my units, and set up a critical Initiative roll for the next turn, because we could respond to the looming disaster. The Axis player rolled a "4." I should be able to beat that, I thought, as I rolled a "3."





15 Feb 1944, 4th Ukrainian Front, Axis First Player Turn

- You don't really appreciate what a battering ram of Panzers can do in Open Terrain with a double turn until it smashes you to a pulp. Overrun after Overrun, combat after combat, Exploit after Exploit. Our Bomber force had been used the turn before, most of my Reserves were DG, and they didn't have to actually combat my mobile units. What they did was go for the estuary, where you can see their units around C53.30. Because my attack against C55.05 had failed, I did not have a path across the estuary to the south. The Iron Panzer Belt stretched three-deep and stacked three steps high (at least).
- The vast bulk of 4th Ukrainian Front was trapped, and it would take at least a turn to even get a defensive line on one of the river lines to the east. Eight mobile corps, and a cavalry corps plus many other units had no hope of getting out. The 4th Ukrainian could go on Regrouping Posture, but that wouldn't help the surrounded units. The Axis could decide whether to keep pushing towards the east or sit tight and send all those Panzers up to help defend Tarnopol.
- The Soviet plan to take Odessa (and likely Tarnopol) were gone in a few moments. We decided to roll for breakout and see just how bad it would be. We had 78 steps in the pocket, and 58% of them ended up in the dead pile. All the rest would return over the next six turns. The mobile formations were particularly hard hit.
- There were two placed with the pontoons that could make a dash for the Rumanian border. If we won initiative, they could get the VP for being on the south map edge and start the Rumanian surrender clock. But we decided they simply would not do so.
- It was brilliant play by my opponent, a perfect riposte that nailed me to the estuary.

Game concludes, 15 Feb 1944

- We had a long discussion about whether there was anything salvageable for the Soviets. We finally decided to switch sides and try the game again. Look for updates as we get into this next matchup.
- Kudos to Tony Birkett for his brilliant game design, and to my gaming companions shown below: Kevin Valerien (Soviet 2nd & 3rd Ukrainian commander, in the back), Curtis Baer (Northern German commander, on the right), and agent-of-my-demise Mark Mazer (South German commander, seated).



Game Concludes, 15 Feb 1944

- We had a long discussion about whether there was anything salvageable for the Soviets. We finally decided to switch sides and try the game again. Look for updates as we get into this next matchup.
- Kudos to Tony Birkett for his brilliant game design, and to my gaming companions (Mark Mazer in the blue shirt was the southern Axis commander, Curtis Baer in the hat was the northern Axis commander, Kevin Valerien in the gray shirt was the Soviet 2nd/3rd Ukrainian Front commander and (black shirt) I was the 1st/4th Ukrainian commander). Mark graciously hosted the game at his house.

