

GAME PROFILE/CRITIQUE

OBJECTIVE: MOSCOW

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

by Scott Renner

Scott has mixed emotions about this somewhat mixed game. You'll please note that this article is "unretouched," even though it takes a number of shots at graphic design of the map (some of which are based on a faulty understanding of how maps are developed, but others of which are perfectly valid). This piece raises the issue of the game as delivered being somewhat different from the game as envisioned in the proposal — an unavoidable problem, particularly as one drifts towards the whackier edge of game design. Space Marines?

—RAS

Many of you will remember *Invasion: America*, SPI's simulation of a hypothetical invasion of the United States in the year 2000. Since then, I've been waiting for SPI to work on another such game, covering the future invasion of Russia. Recently, SPI did just that: they published *Objective: Moscow*, a game which neatly turns the tables on the Russians.

Objective: Moscow follows the standard format for a \$20 SPI game — four maps, three countersheets, and two counter sorting boxes, plus the rules booklet and an assortment of playing aids and charts. The counters are very well done, with a good type face, many colors, and a minimum of die cutting errors. The numerous colors are necessary to represent the many countries involved in one scenario or another. We have the three major powers (Russia, China, and the United States), plus the second-string countries (West Germany, France, England, Japan, and the Warsaw Pact countries), and a large number of third world nations, like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, North and South Korea, Vietnam, *et. al.* For comic relief, the two-division (and practically worthless) Mongolian army is included.

The game map, too, looks nice — from about twenty feet away. A closer examination gives the impression of a horribly cluttered board, and an even more detailed scrutiny reveals several serious mapping errors. The map was made using a polar projection, which reduces distortion in a map of this scale. It took me some time to become acquainted with this map, as I am used to Mercator projections of Europe and Russia; even now, the map doesn't seem quite "right". Most of the terrain types look nice, but the detailed symbols — like major and minor airfields, refinery hexes, aircraft factories, etc. — tend to get lost in the rest of the

terrain unless you happen to be looking very closely. The national borders, weather zone borders, and communication zone borders blend into the hexgrid. These problems are intensified when the mapboard is covered with units; each of these symbols means something, and it can be difficult to remember just where a crucial oil refinery is when it is covered with a stack of units.

The mapping errors present an even greater problem than the general clutter. One such problem is the "trans-Urals canal", an unbroken chain of rivers stretching completely across the Urals mountains. This "canal" starts from a place called Obskaya Guba (hex NW 1046) and runs south by the cities of Kurgan and Sverdlovsk, then turns north and runs by Izhevsk, Gorki, and Yaroslavl, through Lake Onega, and eventually winds up in the Barents Sea. True, the Urals aren't much in the way of mountains, but this canal is a bit much. Modern Soviet technology strikes again.

The rivers in *Objective: Moscow* (and in some other SPI games) pose several problems. Either they have no headwaters (like the rivers composing the trans-Urals canal), or they have no destination. Some of the rivers suffer from both problems; witness the frequent rivers in Afghanistan and elsewhere that start from nowhere and flow to nowhere. The longest of these rivers is actually a chain of rivers, with the center located at Ulan-Ude (hex SE 1916). This river network has a total length of 90 hexsides, covering a distance well over 3000 miles, and doesn't seem to flow anywhere. My atlas indicates that the river should flow through hex 1917 and into Lake Baikal. I can't imagine why the designers couldn't find an atlas like mine. With a map as large as the one in *Objective: Moscow*, I can see why the designers might miss this problem, but I would think that someone else would find it and point it out. I noticed it within the first ten minutes.

Another mapping error, perhaps the most ridiculous, concerns a minor mistake in the border of East Germany, a matter of one hex. This mistake would not be minor to the citizens of Dresden; in fact, I imagine they would be quite surprised to wake up and find out that SPI has moved them to Czechoslovakia. This mistake is really hard to explain — *anyone*, from the person who drew the playtest maps to the artist who made the final version should know that Dresden is *not* in Czechoslovakia. This blunder cannot be written off as a little thing: someone really goofed, and the fact that this error got

through indicates an alarming lack of proof-reading on the maps, if not the entire game. I am, however, reassured by the order of battle (at least concerning this one point) for the NATO front scenario, which lists East German forces starting in Dresden. At least they didn't start the Czechoslovakian army in Dresden (see map detail, page 15).

The other graphics in the game look pretty good, but the mapboard easily cancels out the fine work done on the counter sheets. I have to give this game low marks on the physical aspects. It certainly isn't the sort of thing we're used to seeing from SPI's art department.

The game systems are a combination of old, well-used ideas mixed with some relatively new concepts. The movement rules are a fine example of this. The basic movement system is straightforward enough: units are allocated a certain number of movement points, and expend them during movement at varying rates depending on terrain and unit type. Mechanized units are allowed a second movement phase after combat. Most units exert a fluid zone of control into the surrounding hexes, which inhibits but does not prohibit movement. All of this is relatively familiar, but the designer goes on to introduce some different concepts. The introduction of "bonus movement" allows those units far away from the enemy to travel faster. This is frequently seen in tactical games, but not so common in strategic games. As the designer points out, most games allow units engaging in heavy combat to move farther (by means of advance after combat) than units far away from enemy units. Anyone with the foggiest notion of what happens on a battlefield will know that this isn't so; units move much faster when freed of the need to guard against possible attacks. Another movement innovation is something called reaction movement, which allows the non-phasing player to move some of his mechanized units after the other player's combat but before his second movement phase. Given the weak zones of control and the great expanse of room in Russia, this feature is really a necessity; without this rule, players would be able to blow small holes in the enemy lines and then run rampant in the rear area. With this rule, the defending player can move rear-area reserves to plug gaps in his line. Of course, if he doesn't have the reserves in the first place, he can be in serious trouble.

I have only two complaints about the movement system, and both center around

the stacking rules. The designer's notes point out that an immense number of troops could be crammed into one 60-kilometer hex. However, the designer set the stacking limit at the number of units that would provide a textbook line defense; namely, three divisions per hex. This rule goes far to reduce mapboard clutter (and with this game, every little bit helps), but does not seem to consider the textbook frontage for a division on the *offensive*, which runs about two miles. This would place about 12 divisions in a hex for an offensive all along the hex, something strictly prohibited by the rules. Since headquarters units can absorb units (the divisions are placed off-map on a chart), allowing headquarters to stack seems like a good solution. Unfortunately, headquarters are forbidden to stack in the same hex. This rule reveals a problem in the NATO front order of battle, which indicates that two headquarters are to start in hex NW 2805. Again, we have an example of poor proofreading. The fact that so glaring a mistake could be overlooked makes me wonder how many subtle errors are con-

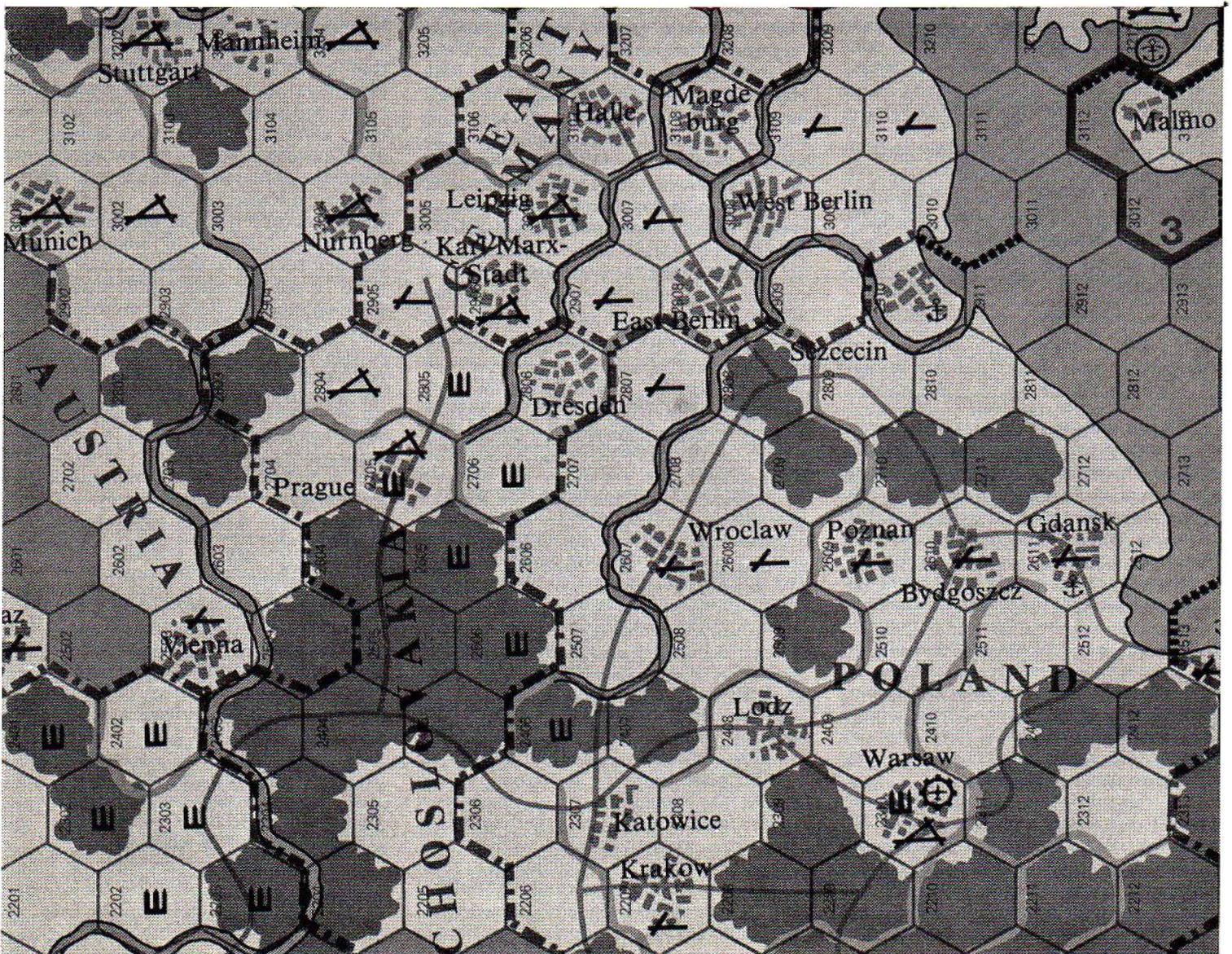
tained in the game, errors that I have no chance of detecting myself.

The combat rules in *Objective: Moscow* use the standard odds-ratio system seen in most wargames. Rough terrain, urban hexes, and the like double the defender's strength, while attacking across a river cuts the attacker's strength in half. The combat results table is extremely bloody, with exchanges popping up everywhere. One new idea in the combat rules is the inclusion of a "personnel value" on the counter, which represents the unit's relative manpower and ability to withstand losses. Exchanges are based on personnel points, rather than number of units or number of combat factors. The force with the fewest personnel points is eliminated, and the other force loses an equal or greater number of personnel points. The greater staying power of most NATO units in the contemporary scenario is represented both by a greater number of personnel points and by the reverse side of the counter, which depicts the unit at reduced strength. NATO units can utilize this flip side of the counter

when they are called on to lose personnel points in an exchange. Some units, like zero-strength headquarters and mobilizing Soviet units, have personnel values of zero; these units are automatically eliminated in exchanges, with no loss to the other player.

Many of the units start the game in an untried condition; their true combat value is not known until they are actually in combat. All of the Soviet and Soviet-allied units are untried, as are the Chinese and Iraqi — in fact, only U.S. and U.S.-allied units have known combat factors (with the exception of the North Koreans, which start the game as a neutral power). The designer explains this in two ways. First, the United States army contains the units most recently tried in combat; for this reason, their combat performance can be better predicted than that of other armies. This seems reasonable for the contemporary scenario, although I'm not sure of the value of Vietnam combat experience in 1988. Secondly, since NATO units are supposed to have greater staying power in battle, the reverse side of the counter is required to

Detail of *Objective: Moscow* northwest map section



depict the reduced state of the unit, and therefore cannot be used to indicate an untried unit. Any alert gamer will realize that this is an arbitrary and artificial facet of the game; furthermore, it places an unrealistic handicap on the Soviet player. There is no reason to suppose that NATO commanders could predict the performance of a French infantry division any better than Russian generals could foretell the performance of a Russian armor division. I don't mind untried units, but I prefer that they be used consistently. This particularly applies in the 1988 scenario, where the reverse side of the counters is not used for reduced-strength units.

The effects of supply in *Objective: Moscow* are fairly simple: units out of supply have their combat and movement factors halved. The rules for supply determination are a little more complicated. U.S. and U.S.-allied units draw supply along the roads from a friendly map-edge, although a limited number of units can be supplied from ports. Soviet and Soviet-allied units draw supply from the *railroads*, not the roads; this explains why the two separate nets are included. Soviet units have *two* supply sources; supply for movement purposes is drawn from refinery hexes, while combat supply comes from urban hexes. Chinese units draw both combat and movement supply from Chinese urban hexes, although Chinese leg infantry units are always in movement supply.

To be in supply, land units must be within two hexes of a supply source, or within three hexes of a headquarters unit which is itself in supply. Only the presence of enemy units will block the supply line; enemy zones of control will not. Considering the size of the hexes, this rule is quite realistic.

US 3 FB F111 99-4-23	US E F F-15 0-6-14	SW S6 FB Vggn 1-1(4)	US 40 B B52 82-2-80
----------------------------	--------------------------	----------------------------	---------------------------

The air units in *Objective: Moscow* are one of the best features of the game, and certainly an improvement over the abstract air system used in *Invasion: America* in that players can easily observe the effects of their air attacks. (In *Invasion: America*, the principle effect of air attacks is the neutralization of defensive terrain benefits.) The only application of air units in *Objective: Moscow* is ground support. I was interested to note that strategic air warfare was purposefully left out. This seems logical to me; although I can't imagine how conventional bombing raids could be mistaken for nuclear strikes, I think the Soviets would be likely to strike back against enemy industry with the only weapon available — ICBM's.

The air rules themselves are ingeniously simple. Every air unit has a range instead of a movement allowance, which indicates the number of hexes the unit can fly to its target and return. The phasing player moves his air units to their targets in the movement phase; the other player moves his air units to the hex in the interception phase. Combat takes

place in the interception phase, using the standard combat results table, but not in the normal fashion. The intercepting airplanes attack the phasing player's aircraft singly, in the order that they are stacked; the attack and defense factors of the two stacks are *not* added together for one large combat. Each airplane must be attacked at even odds or better before the plane beneath it may be attacked. In this fashion, fighter protection for bombers becomes practical; also, because of their low air-to-air combat factor, bombers will not be used for interception often. After the interception phase is complete, intercepting air units return to their airbases. The surviving aircraft on ground support add their ground attack factor to the friendly land units, if any. Air units may attack enemy ground units by themselves, but are halved in combat strength when they do so. In an exchange result, one air unit is equivalent to one personnel point, regardless of the air unit's strength. I give the air rules high marks; they provide a good simulation which *seems* realistic, yet at the same time they do not add too much to the complexity of the game.

The Soviet Army does not begin the contemporary scenarios at full strength; many of its units must be mobilized before they can fight at maximum efficiency. There are other games which require one or both players to mobilize units during the game, but very few give the option of committing the units to combat before mobilization. *Objective: Moscow* gives the Soviet player this option. The Soviet Army is divided into three classes of units: class I units, at full strength, class II units, partially mobilized at 50-75% strength, and class III units, which are cadres at 10-30% strength. The class I units are combat-ready at the beginning of the game. The Soviet player must make a decision for each of the other units on his first turn. He must decide whether to mobilize the unit, or use it immediately at reduced strength. The decision, once made, is permanent: mobilized units may not move, and if attacked must defend with their peacetime strength. Class II units require two turns of inactivity to mobilize; they become active at their wartime strength in the reinforcement phase of turn two. Class III units are mobilized sometime between turn five and turn seven. On turns five and six, one die is rolled for every class III unit mobilizing. The unit becomes active at its wartime strength on a roll of one or two. Once mobilized, units are replaced with a separate counter, indicating that the unit is at wartime strength on the front of the counter, and concealing the actual combat value on the rear.

The optional nuclear combat rules are another good feature in the game. Nuclear attacks may be made in place of conventional attacks in the combat phase. Different units can bring a certain number of nuclear attack points to bear on the defending units. Not surprisingly, U.S. divisions and B-52 bomber units are the strongest in terms of nuclear attack capability. There is only one real limit to nuclear combat — every attack has a one in

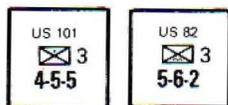
six chance of triggering a nuclear holocaust and ending the game. This makes players very cautious about using their tactical nukes; a player who uses them too often will wind up losing the game. The rules also place a limit on the number of nuclear points that can be used for the entire game. While the Chinese player can easily use all of his points in two or three attacks, the Soviet and NATO players have enough points for at least 26 attacks. The odds that one player will use all his points without triggering a holocaust are very slim, less than one chance in a hundred. Obviously, this last restriction will not bother the Soviet and NATO players much, although the Chinese could conceivably run out of nuclear points.

No game of this scale set in Russia is complete without some weather rules. Bitter experience from previous invasions of Russia shows the importance of the weather conditions. *Objective: Moscow* has a good set of weather rules. The mapboard is divided into ten weather zones — and not just into a series of arbitrary concentric circles, either, for different weather zones appear sporadically across the map. Each weather zone is in one of five possible weather states at any given time. Clear weather has no effect on play. Clouds have the effect of grounding limited weather aircraft, but do not affect land units. Rain grounds some airplanes, and doubles movement costs. A freeze allows all aircraft to fly, and causes the major rivers to freeze over, allowing units to cross without the usual movement penalty. Snow weather, the harshest condition, grounds all limited weather aircraft, doubles all movement costs, and cancels the movement benefits of the road net. One master table dictates the weather conditions in each zone, while a table of die roll modifications allows for seasonal trends in weather. No weather condition has any effect on combat or supply (except for a minor limit on advance after combat during rain conditions). This strikes me as a little strange; surely adverse weather would make supply and combat more difficult. Other than this objection, the weather rules look pretty good.

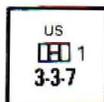
US 1 4 4-5-4	8 C43	US x 0 S1-0-5
--------------------	----------	---------------------

Objective: Moscow has several types of units with special capabilities. Some of these units are familiar, like the marine divisions and the aircraft carriers; others are possible future developments, like hovercraft and cruise missiles; still others are downright silly, like the United Space Marines. The naval units simply serve as naval airbases, although they come with their own air unit. U.S. Marine divisions can make amphibious landings in unoccupied coastal hexes, and are always in supply when on the coast. A few infantry units are designated as mountain infantry; these units are tripled when defending in rough and broken terrain. *All* the Chinese infantry divisions are classed as mountain infantry, presumably to simulate

their defensive ability in mountainous terrain.



The rules covering airborne units are simple, yet provide a reasonably accurate picture of airborne operations. The airborne division must start the turn at a friendly airbase. The unit flies to the target hex exactly like an air unit, may be escorted and intercepted like an air unit, and defends in air-to-air combat like an air unit (with a strength of one). This last fact makes it necessary for players to provide strong escorts for their airborne divisions; otherwise, the enemy player will intercept and shoot down the valuable units before they can reach the ground. Airborne units can be dropped directly on enemy ground units, but they must eliminate the unit or force it to retreat, or the airborne unit is automatically eliminated. Airborne units may drop any number of times, and in theory are capable of making a drop every turn, which seems a little much. Fortunately it doesn't happen very often. As for the airborne divisions, the rules say only that they do not have to pay an extra movement point to leave an enemy zone of control. I would think that they should be a little easier to air-lift, but the rules don't mention anything about that.



Hovercraft units first appeared in *Invasion: America*, and in *Objective: Moscow* they have the same powers. They act as very fast mechanized divisions, but can move over all-sea hexes and pay only one movement point per hex regardless of terrain. However, they are forbidden to enter broken, rough, or urban hexes. Given the size of the hexes, I would imagine that the hovercraft units would be unable to attack in the above terrain types. As the rules stand, hovercraft are quite capable of attacking an enemy urban hex, although they cannot move into it, even if the hex is unoccupied.

Cruise missile brigades are unique to *Objective: Moscow*, as are the Japanese Samurai divisions. The first of these represent control centers for tactical cruise missiles. While they have no combat strength of their own, they enhance the combat ability of the units they attack with. The Samurai divisions are a less credible invention of the game. Apparently they represent infantry trained in fanatical, if not suicidal, assault tactics. The U.S. player may convert any Japanese mechanized infantry unit into a Samurai division, thereby tripling the unit's attack strength and reducing the defense strength by the same factor. The troops are obviously motivated to win; any attack made by the unit must have a result of "defender eliminated", or the Samurai division is itself eliminated. The rules do not mention if Samurai divisions can switch back to regular

mechanized infantry divisions, but I assume they cannot.

Nothing could make the Samurai divisions more believable than a glance through the rules covering the Space Marines. These units function as airborne units that can land anywhere and cannot be intercepted. The rules state that the Space Marines "... free-fall from orbital shuttlecraft in an erratic fashion to avoid the laser ABM defenses..." Sounds a lot like *Starship Troopers* to me. There are two problems with this rationale. First, freefall means just what it says — falling freely. Free-falling objects do not fall in an "erratic fashion"; they fall in easily predicted parabolic paths. If each and every Space Marine had maneuvering rockets on his re-entry suit (and some way of insuring that he would land with the rest of the brigade if he used them), that would be different. Secondly, the falling marines shouldn't be too threatened by the ABM system in the first place. Any ABM system is going to be designed to knock out several hundred ICBM's coming from different launchers and heading for different targets; the system is *not* going to be designed to destroy several hundred man-sized targets landing in the same place. I doubt if the laser targeting systems would even recognize a marine as a target. The *shuttlecraft*, on the other hand, should make excellent targets for the laser ABM system. Reflective and ablative shielding might work, as might evasive action by the shuttlecraft. However, since there is no reason why these things can't be done to an ICBM, we must assume that the ABM system can overcome these defenses. I'm afraid that in real life the lifespan of a Space Marine would be very short — he faces an excellent chance of being killed long before he can land and fight the enemy.

The Space Marines have one other advantage besides their ability to drop, which is their high defensive factor. I don't see how these units justify such a high defensive ability; it seems to me that all of their combat factors should be lower than those of a typical airborne division. The problems involved in transporting equipment and supply for a brigade into orbit must be overwhelming — and certainly much harder to overcome than transporting equipment for an airborne division by airplanes. I would think that the Space Marines would be forced to work with *very* little equipment, and therefore should not have such a high defense factor. (*Please* don't tell me that the defense factor is due to the powered armor suits they wear!) Since the Space Marines are the only units with the capability to drop behind enemy lines, they can force the Soviet player to garrison his rear areas — once those units are lodged in a city, they won't be easy to force out.

There are several scenarios in *Objective: Moscow*, most of which deal with the contemporary battles. There are three local one-map scenarios, covering the European front (NATO vs. the Warsaw Pact and Russia), the Mideast front (Russia and Iraq against Turkey and Iran), and the China front

(USSR against China). The contemporary campaign game ties all of the fronts together. Sadly, there was only one scenario dealing with the 1998 campaign, which I thought was the most interesting part of the game. Finally, there is a Korea minigame, which pits the North and South Koreans against each other.

Victory in the contemporary scenarios is determined only by possession of cities, oil refineries, ports, airfields, and other territorial objectives. Victory in the scenarios is relatively simple; the scenario has a set length, and the player attacking the Soviets must exceed the Soviet victory point total by a certain number to win. The campaign game is designed around the idea of three separate sides in the war (NATO, Russia, and China); victory is determined for each side even if one player controls both NATO and China. On certain turns, the current victory point level of the Chinese forces and the NATO forces are compared with the victory level chart. This chart lists two point totals; exceeding the first results in victory, while dropping below the second results in surrender. The victory conditions in the 1998 campaign game are more ambitious — the U.S. player must conquer the Soviet Union, the Chinese player must recapture Siberia. The concept of three separate forces is retained; victory for the U.S. and Chinese players is determined separately, and both forces must win if one player controls them.

I'm not completely satisfied with *Objective: Moscow*. There were too many little flaws — mistakes in the map, poorly-worded rules — which I hoped could be avoided. Still, minor mistakes occur in virtually every game and do not spoil the game in themselves. But there was way too much emphasis on the contemporary scenarios — and therein lies my principle complaint. Virtually every design innovation in the game was made specifically and solely for the contemporary game. The optional nuclear rules, limited weather aircraft, and headquarters units are not used in the 1998 scenario. The mobilization rules might as well not be used in the 1998 game, since all the Russians start out mobilized. Even the scenarios are heavily based on the contemporary game — there are five contemporary scenarios, and only one for 1998. The game was billed as a simulation of the invasion of Russia in 1998, yet the 1998 scenario looks like it was added as an afterthought. I would have been content if the contemporary scenarios had been completely omitted. This would have allowed the designers to concentrate on the 1998 game, given them more counters to work with, and perhaps provided incentive to develop more 1998 scenarios. I think *Objective: Moscow* would have been better had this happened; there is no doubt that it would have come out looking more like the game advertised.

Objective: Moscow is not a bad game. It isn't a classic, either — a pity, since I think it could have been one. In a few years, *Objective: Moscow* will be remembered as just another game published by Simulations Publications, Inc. in 1978. Frankly, I had hoped for more.