

A Back Hander for Von Manstein's Backhand Blow

BY KEVIN REID

Von Manstein's Backhand Blow (vMBB) is an excellent game in this hobby of ours in that it is easy to learn and also well worth the effort to master. The rules are comprehensive and thus valuable gaming time can be spent actually pushing the attractive counters around instead of struggling with a difficult system.

This article will cover just the initial turn of the game, where the Soviets are at their strongest comparative strength. Initial German moves are quite important here as the contest can be lost on Turn 1 if not carefully played. Therefore, I will offer some basic guidance to hopefully avoid an early German defeat and thus help to set the stage for a close match.

Soviet Player *Schwerpunkt* 1 Segment

The first turn sees the Soviets with five C3i points. There is no reason to bank these for future turns as there is so much to be done, a lot of distance to cover, and a time limit in which to do it. Therefore an expenditure of three C3i points in the first *Schwerpunkt* segment will provide the greatest chance for the most Action Points (AP) to initially be available. Given average dice, this should see 15 AP available during *Schwerpunkt* 1. Spend 8 of those on the Southwest Front and 7 on the Voronzh Front. The Southwest Front has greater opportunity to stretch the German lines, and there is the necessity to cross the Donets River to earn the 5 VP; hence the extra AP is placed there.

In the Southwest Front (8 AP):

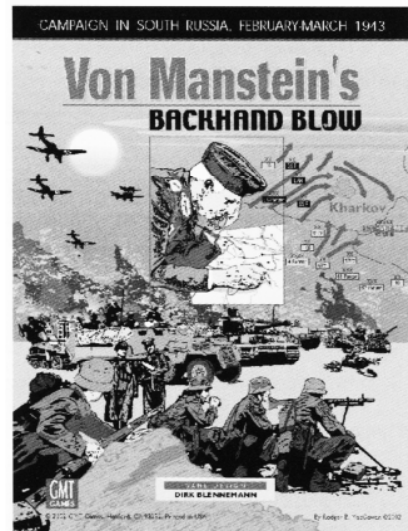
- 172 Infantry Division to 4314 and 350 Infantry Division to 4115. This will surround the German Infantry Regiment in Kupyansk (hex 4215), to be dealt with later
- 3 Arm Corp and 10 Arm Corp to 3821, 35G Infantry Division to 3921. This sets up for an attack with the remaining 3 AP on the 320/586 German Infantry Regiment, followed by exploitation across the Donets River

In the Voronzh Front (7 AP):

- 161 infantry Division to 3901, this starts the encirclement of the GD/GRE Mechanized Infantry *Kampfgruppe* in hex 4002
- 305 Infantry Division to 3900 for flank protection to the above move
- 62G Infantry Division to 4212 to start a possible surround on Pol infantry unit
- 12 Tank Group to 4110
- 37 Infantry Division to 4102 which completes the encirclement of the GD/GRE
- 15 Tank Corp to 4105 to protect the front marker and to join attack on GD/GRE during the next *Schwerpunkt* segment
- 160 Infantry Division to 4107 to support 48G which is slightly exposed

I don't feel that Soviet units on the Voronzh Front can accomplish as much by attacking during the first *Schwerpunkt* segment as opposed to just moving. The 3 AP required for an attack would be better used in encircling the GD/GRE unit and preparing for further attacks in the second *Schwerpunkt*.

If the Voronzh Front has more than 7 AP available, moving the 219th Infantry Division to 4102 will bring the unit into play to later help reduce the GD/GRE unit.



The initial attack in the South is on the 320/586 German Infantry Regiment in hex 3822 is conducted at 7:1 odds with a -2 DRM (one for river, the other for town terrain). This attack is aimed at advancing a unit across the Donets River to gain the 5 VP, and it further greatly complicates the German mission in defence. A CRT result of /3 is required against the 320/586, with /1 to be expended in defender retreat and /2 in eliminating the unit. This ensures that the defending German Infantry Regiment cannot take up a position to stop advancing Soviet armour from getting across the river. Either a modified dice roll of 13 or a modified roll of 6 with a chit giving +1 hit is required to achieve this. There are 8 in 16 chits that can give the German player a beneficial —DRM, and another 4 in 16 giving him a -1 Hit or halving his losses. Chance would suggest that with 2 picks the German is more likely to get a DRM modifier. These however are particularly weak in the early part of the game with only 2 of 8 chits having a —2 DRM while the other 6 chits are all —1 DRMs.

The Soviets have the same chance with their chits to pick a DRM or a hit modifier. At this stage though, the chits are stronger for the Soviets in DRM modifiers because 6 out of the 8 modifier chits are +2 DRM or better (and 2 of these are +5 DRM!). With the Soviets selecting 5 chits to

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Schwerpunkt Series — Standard Rules Summary

by Steve Carey

- (3.3) All modifiers are cumulative (e.g., Town in a Forest hex is -1 + -2 = -3). Max +/-10 drm in combat. (12.82)
- (3.5) Until Combat, see only the top unit in enemy stack; if Motorized present, must be on top.
- (4.2) Units Move/Fight or Fight/Move in a Schwerpunkt (and General) segment. (12.9)
- (5.2) Friendly unit will negate ZOC for supply only; not retreat, movement, or admin move.
- (6.1) When checking supply status, units with OOS markers that cannot race a supply line will undergo Attrition check during the Administrative Segment. (12.10)
- (6.4) All OOS Motorized units will have 3 MPs. All OOS non-Motorized units will have 1 MP. All OOS units have their Combat Strength and Tactical Ratings halved.
- (7.1) Players may save C3i points, for future use, turn-to-turn.
- (7.3) C3i points are spent only during a Schwerpunkt Segment, not during a General Segment. Spend 1-3 C3i points to roll on the Activity Table. Spend 0 C3i points, the Segment ends. *Note:* a player must declare Move/Fight or Fight/Move before rolling on the Activity Table. (12.10)
- (8.0) Keep track of Activity Points on the General Records Track: 1 to move a unit, 3 per combat (any units).
- (9.0) Stacking only applies at the end of Movement and end of Retreat/Advance. (12.10)
- (11.2) Movement or Combat in a General Segment is FREE; use markers in General Segment.
- (12.1) Combat is voluntary (and costs 3 APs, regardless of the number of involved units). (12.10)
- (12.3) An attack may only target 1 hex (i.e., no multi-hex targets).
- (12.51) Combat Chits drawn equal to each Player's highest Tac Rated unit. (12.11)
- (12.52) Player with Tac Superiority (remember modifiers like Integrity and Concentric Attack) gets to use up to 3 Chits; Player without Tac Superiority may use only 1 Chit. Tac Superiority Tie? Both players may use 2 Chits. (14.0)
- (12.6) Entirely Motorized Defender that has Tactical Superiority may Refuse Combat; Retreat 2 hexes (not ZOC) and the Attacker then may Advance

1 hex (but loses his spent 3 APs). Concentric Attack (participating units directly opposite hexes, alternating surround, or more than 3 hexes) raises the Tactical Rating of all Attackers by +1. Defender takes losses first. Losses must be equally distributed amongst involved units. *Note:* the first hit does not have to come from the unit with the highest Tac Rating. Only the Defender may Retreat (to help satisfy losses); the Attacker must take all hits as Step Losses. If the Defender takes 1 loss as a Retreat, all his units in the hex Retreat 1 hex. Likewise, all Retreat 2 hexes for a 2 hit Retreat. Max Retreat is 2 hexes - Defender must absorb losses in excess of 2. *Note:* Stationary (MA of 0) units may not Retreat. *Important.* Non-Motorized or OOS Motorized units may only choose to Retreat 1 hex to satisfy a step loss. Supplied Motorized units (not stacked with Non-Motorized or OOS Motorized) may choose the 2 hex Retreat option. Mixed stack can't do a 2 hex Retreat. Mandatory Retreat (counts as 1 Loss point) if the final Loss # exceeds the total number of Defending units. If he can't Retreat, +1 hit and take all hits as Step Losses. Retreating units may split up. If Retreat into/thru ZOC (even friendly occupied), the stack suffers 1 additional Step Loss. May Retreat through a fully stacked hex, but not stop in. Mud or Deep Mud restricts Motorized Retreat (not Marsh/unbridged Major River hexside) and Advance (unbridged Major River hexside). Advance is normal 1 hex or 2nd hex for Supplied Motorized units (but not ZOC to ZOC for the 2" hex) if Defenders Retreat 2 or are totally eliminated (may split up, and any direction). Unmodified 2or12 Combat roll generates a Random Event. Finish that combat, check RE. *Note:* Any Move or Combat during a RE is FREE, even for units that already acted this Segment.

the German 2, the odds are good for getting the + DRM or + hit chit required for the successful attack.

With a /3 result the German unit is thus removed and the Soviets can then advance two of their Armour Corp across the river. This gains the important 5 VP bonus for being across this river.

In the event of a modified /2 result, the German player may elect to take a step loss and pay the other point in retreat. The only hex available to retreat to is 3722 (going through an EZOC would cause an additional step loss, eliminating the unit and not helping the German play). Due to its ZOC, a German unit in 3722 will stop you from getting units across the Donets in this SP Segment. The Soviets can still get across in SP2, or the General segment, via any of the 5 bridges West of Izyum (3822).

German Player Schwerpunkt 1 Segment

As the German player, the best use of your 2 limited C3i points is to have an expenditure of 1 on each of the Schwerpunkt segments. Spending both on the first segment may only give you 3 or 4 more AP, not worth being left dry in the second segment. By spending one C3i point on each *Schwerpunkt*, this on average should give you 7 Action Points per segment. The disparity in available AP is compensated by the Soviet requirement to attack, and in doing so they must spend the required 3 AP for each of those attacks. This will rapidly consume the Soviet available AP each turn. The Germans should concede ground such that the Soviet player must spend AP to advance into contact again. If the Soviets can attack without being required to spend precious APs to move adjacent, they have been allowed to use their forces much too efficiently.

In detailing the following German moves, some players may be appalled by the abandonment of a large unit, specifically the GD/GRE Mechanized Infantry Regiment, in hex 4002. I've already suggested encircling it in the first Soviet *Schwerpunkt*

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segment because it's a common move that I see most players carry out. Whether to attempt a rescue, or to leave the GD/GRE to its fate, is a decision that the German player will likely initially be faced with.

If the Germans do decide to break the encirclement of the GD/GRE, the best odds that can be arranged would be 3:1. Using the besieged unit, the nearby Infantry Regiment (forming a concentric attack), and the GD Armoured Cavalry are all required for the attack. The Germans would have a Tactical rating advantage of 5 to 2 due the concentric attack, hoping to achieve a desired result of /2 from the CRT. This would force a Soviet retreat that could not be satisfied, eliminating the unit and freeing the GD/GRE.

But it's not that easy. The German player needs a +5 DRM on average dice (a roll of 7) to ensure a modified 12 on the CRT. The Germans only have 2 chits with +2 DRM or better, and their other 6 modifier chits are +1 DRM. This means the German probably needs, at a minimum, 1 of the +2 DRM chits (out of his 16 chit pool) during his draws. If he fails to draw one, then the best that can be generated is a +3 DRM with 3 of the +1 chits. This doesn't even take into account the Soviet 2 chit draws where they too have 8 out of 16 chits that provide a DRM. Unfortunately for the Germans, 6 out of those 8 Soviet chits are -2 DRM or better.

Thus, the German player really needs great chit selection or hot dice to recover the GD/GRE. Even should the attack succeed, the participating units will be so out of place that further quality German units can be easily surrounded. It's better to accept that the GD/GRE as lost and move on.

With an average of 7 AP, I instead suggest the Germans spend their points as follows:

- 7/6 Mechanised Infantry Division to 3824 (if Soviets over the River Donets), otherwise move a surviving 320/586 to the marsh at hex 3720 to cover the bridges West of Izyum (3822)

- KG /Fus Kampfgruppe to 3905
- GD/GD Armoured Cavalry KG to 3904
- Pol Infantry Regiment to 4014
- T/T Mechanised Infantry KG to 3912
- DR/DR Armoured Cavalry KG to 3907 and
- 168/422 Infantry Regiment to 3700

These moves are intended to shore up the front line and allow a path of retreat from the inevitable Soviet attacks. At this point it is critical that the German player conserve his forces because if he suffers too many step losses, the game will likely be over due to a Soviet VP total greater than 6.

Soviet Player *Schwerpunkt* 2 Segment

The Soviets have two C3i points left that should yield an average of 11 AP. Again, I suggest the Southwest Front receive the larger portion (6 AP) and the remainder (5 AP) go to Voronzh front.

If the German 320/586 Infantry Regiment was not destroyed, then a Soviet unit needs to be sent around to deal with it. There are about 5 bridges west of Izyum in the bend of the river that could be used. In the event the German player has moved a unit to try and block this route, an attack needs to be made. The Soviets can then advance into the

bend of the river before crossing in the General Segment.

Other uses for the AP available are to move additional force in to destroy the surrounded German infantry Regiment in hex 4215 during the subsequent General segment. More forces are also brought in to assault the 2 pocketed units of the 19th Panzer Division in hex 4023, again during the General Segment. This unit is trapped in your ZOC, so rub your hands gleefully at any attempt to extricate it. The odds will be low, and more casualties to attacking Germans here will only play into a turn 1 win strategy.

Move additional forces against the weak POL Infantry Regiment; if it remained in the town of Dvurechnaya, it will be easier to eliminate. If the POL unit moved, then a unit, most likely Mechanised, needs to be sent against it. The POL unit's 1 step will help contribute towards the victory conditions, if you can eliminate it.

In the Voronzh sector, the GD/GRE unit will be attacked with the help of the 15 Tank Corp moved north to assist. With 5 AP, and 3 of those AP expended in attack, only 2 more units can activate; these units likewise should be moved to help in the attack.




German Player *Schwerpunkt* 2 Segment

The German Player needs to remove his units from being adjacent to Soviets anywhere that the enemy could get reasonable odds. In the ensuing General Segment, the Soviets can either move or fight (not both). If you are not adjacent, then the combat option is not available to the enemy. If the odds are around the 3:1 or less, and you consider it important to hold the position, then it is probably worth staying. Any Soviet attack is likely to be just as bloody (or worse) for him, helping you avoid quickly losing the game due to the sudden death victory conditions.

Forget attempts to retrieve the encircled 19PZ because any attacker results must be paid in step losses. It is far better to wait for a Soviet attack, and then retreat away.

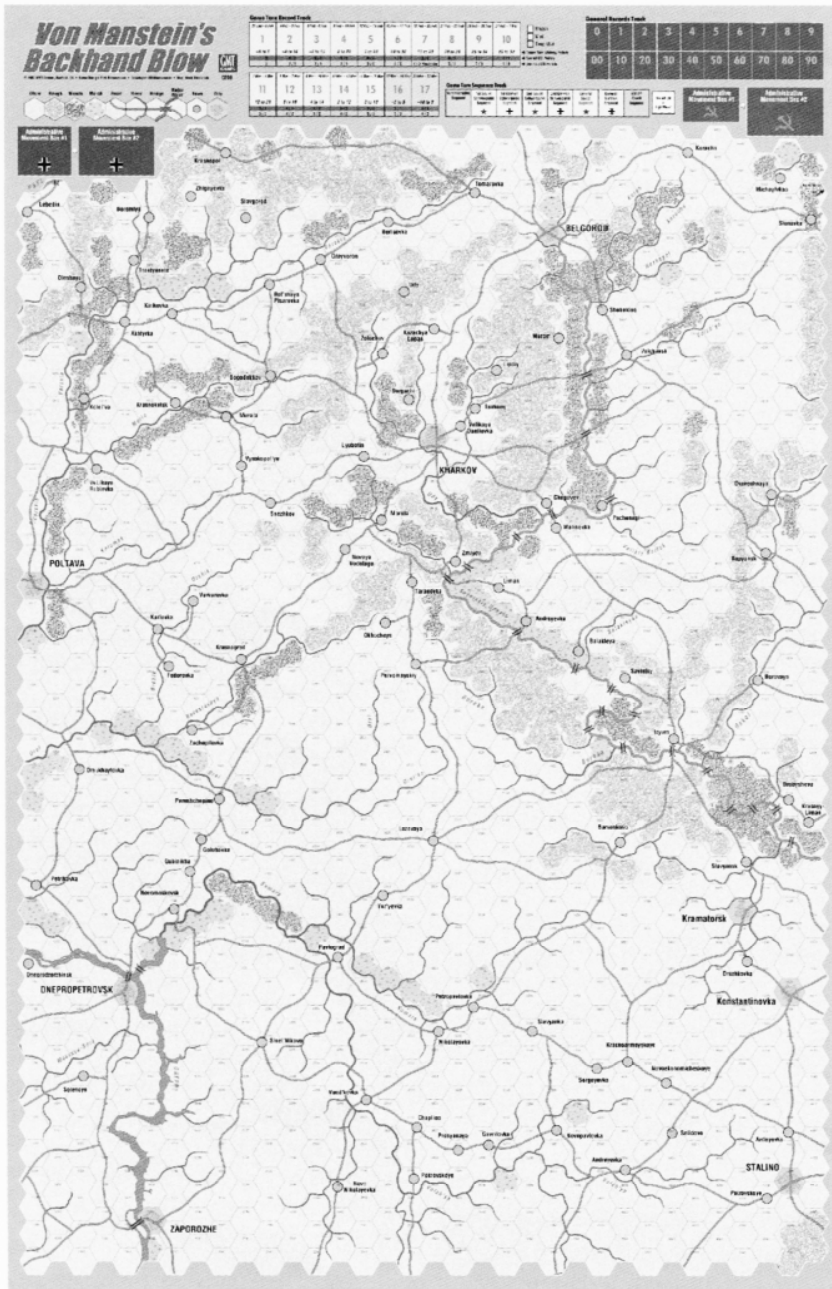
Von Manstein's Backhand Blow

Campaign in South Russia, Feb-March 1943
Published: 2002
Game Design: Dirk Blennemann
Game Developer: Uli Blennemann
Art Director: Rodger B. MacGowan
Map & Counters: Mark Simonitch

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Contents: 342 Color Counters; One 22x34 inch Map; Rulebook; Two dice; Player Aid Cards; Bookcase Box
Time Scale: Two days per turn
Map Scale: 8 km per hex
Unit Scale: Corps, Division, Regt., Battalion
Players: 1-2

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cancels out the VP bonus that the Germans gain for having his units east of the river. Eliminated German units likely are going to be the 320/586 Infantry Regiment, GD/GRE, 298/525 Infantry Regiment, at least 2 steps in the 19th Panzer Division, and the POL Infantry Regiment for a total of 9 VPs. As long as the Soviet player manages to sustain a maximum of just 2 step losses, he will win with an adjusted total of 7 VP. Varied chit selections on both sides will cause a fluctuation in losses via DRMs or reduced hits, but the situation is clearly dangerous for the Germans at the onset.

The Soviets start about 55% stronger than the Germans in raw combat points. This margin is only reduced to a 35% deficit for the German at game's end (assuming nil loss and nil variables reinforcements). The steady Soviet loss of combat chit effectiveness, and the corresponding German combat chit increase, is the game's balancing mechanism - if the Germans can hold on.

In conclusion, vMBB is an excellent design. The above starting guidelines will hopefully get you through the first turn without too many lost games as the Germans. From then on it is a matter of the Germans falling back while planning for their inevitable counterattack. There is certainly some pleasure in surviving a mauling from the Soviet colossus and then being able to return the favour!

The game is still available from GMT and I would encourage readers who do not have a copy to obtain one. It is truly a great game.



An additional step loss will occur due to the retreat through an EZOC, but this is less costly (both in terms of step losses and APs expended) than an attack would have been.

The General Segment

In the General Segment, units may move or fight (not both) without any expenditure of Activity Points. Depending on how the turn has already progressed, now is a good

time for the Soviets to move all their troops forward and/or set up attacks for next turn. In contrast, the Germans can freely adjust their unit positions to form a better defensive line. It's not impossible to counterattack early as the Germans, but such strikes should be carefully evaluated.

Overall the Soviet can readily win this game on Turn 1 if the German player is not precise in his moves. By getting a unit across the Donets River, the Soviet player

