

KRIEGSSPIEL 1914

by Professor Philip Sabin

INTRODUCTION

This is a simulation game of the most crucial month of the Western front campaign, from late August to late September 1914. Two teams in separate rooms direct the actions of the German and Allied forces as they seek to capture or hold territory and to inflict losses on the opposing forces while minimising their own losses. Each team has a map showing only the shifting front line and the location of its own forces. A team of umpires collects the orders from each team, resolves them on a master map in a central room showing both sides' forces, and reports back to each team so that a further round of orders may be issued.

THE MAP

Action takes place on a map of the battle area, as shown on the final page of this booklet. The map is covered with a hexagon grid, and all blocks on the map must occupy a specific hex. Each hex represents an area 100 km across, and contains a named town or city. Five hexsides contain difficult terrain, representing the Ardennes forest and the Vosges mountains. On each team's map and on the master map, a small coloured wooden marker is placed in each hex currently held by the Germans; all other hexes are Allied controlled.

THE PLAYING PIECES

Each side has twelve rectangular wooden blocks to represent its military forces. Different coloured blocks represent the armies of Germany, France, Britain and Belgium. Each block represents around three corps of troops. Blocks are 'fresh' when standing up on end, and 'spent' when laid on their side. Fresh blocks become spent by absorbing a hit in combat, and spent blocks become fresh by receiving reinforcements. If all the blocks in a hex become spent and must absorb a further hit, they are all routed and permanently removed from play (however many there are).

SEQUENCE OF PLAY

The simulation is played in six turns, each representing five days of real time, from August 20th to September 18th. The current turn is shown by a large die rotated to show the turn number. Each turn proceeds through four phases as follows:

1. Orders phase
3. Movement phase
4. Combat phase
5. Reports phase

ORDERS

In the Orders phase, each team discusses its strategy and then secretly and simultaneously issues orders for the deployment of available reinforcements and the movement and attacks of its blocks. These orders are recorded by the umpire attached to that team, and they are also displayed by moving and adjusting the blocks on the team's own map. Blocks ordered to attack an adjacent enemy-held hex are placed on the border of that hex until the Reports phase when the team will learn the outcome of its own and the enemy's attacks. The German team must agree orders by consensus, but in the Allied team, one player makes decisions for the British and Belgians while the others handle the French forces (though consultation is allowed). To reflect their offensive doctrine and initial underestimation of German strength, no French blocks may move on turn 1, and at least six fresh French blocks must be ordered to attack that turn. The Belgian block may never attack, and the only move order which it may be given is to move to Ypres, where it must remain unless routed.

REINFORCEMENT

Each turn, the German and French armies may send reinforcements by rail to one spent block of that nationality which is in supply, thereby making the block fresh. On turns 4 to 6, the French may reinforce two spent blocks per turn. Once per game, on or after turn 4, the British block may be made fresh if it is spent and in supply. However, to reflect limited rail capacity, only one Allied block per hex may be reinforced in any single turn. The Belgians never receive reinforcements. Reinforcements may not be accumulated, and are lost if not used. Blocks may move or attack normally on the turn when they are reinforced.

MOVEMENT

In each turn, each block may march to an adjacent hex which is already under friendly control. Any or all blocks may be moved, in any combination of directions. All reinforcements and movements ordered by both sides are recorded on the master map in the Movement phase, as conveyed by the umpires attached to the two teams. There are no limits on how many blocks may occupy a hex or move across a hexside. Blocks may not move off the map.

ATTACKS

Fresh blocks which do not move that turn may instead be ordered to attack an adjacent enemy controlled hex. Spent, unsupplied or Belgian blocks may never attack. No more than two friendly blocks per turn may be ordered to attack across each hexside. To reflect coordination problems, attacks on a given enemy hex may be ordered only from two mutually adjacent friendly hexes each turn (for example from Paris and Melun into Soissons), so no more than four blocks may ever attack a single hex. If a German block ordered to attack becomes spent due to an Allied attack on its own hex, its attack is cancelled along with any advance, but other planned German attacks must continue regardless. Attacks are resolved after all movement by both sides has been completed.

COMBAT RESOLUTION

Attacks are resolved on the master map in the Combat phase of each turn. They are resolved hex by hex, with all Allied attacks being resolved completely first, and then all German attacks. For each hex attacked, one attacking block automatically becomes spent (even if the hex is empty). A second attacking block (if any) becomes spent if there are at least two fresh blocks in the hex attacked, but a single attacking block suffers no additional penalty in this event. Blocks in the hex attacked suffer one hit if there are at least two attacking blocks, and they suffer a second hit if there are at least two more blocks attacking the hex than there are (fresh or spent) blocks in the hex attacked.

Each hit to either side makes a fresh block spent. Fresh blocks are always the first to absorb hits. If there is a choice of fresh blocks, then each successive hit is applied according to the priorities listed below, moving as far down the list as required to resolve the allocation.

- 1) German blocks due to attack a hex from which they are under attack
- 2) German blocks not due to attack
- 3) Blocks attacking from a different hex than the attacking block which takes the first hit
- 4) Blocks attacking from a hex containing another block attacking the same hex
- 5) French before British before Belgian blocks
- 6) Blocks in or due to attack a hex further south, or further east if equally southerly

If an attacked hex suffers one or two remaining hits and there are no fresh blocks left to absorb them, then ALL spent blocks in the hex are routed and removed permanently from play. Hits have no effect on empty hexes. If the attacked hex was empty (even if no hits are scored against it) or if all defending blocks are routed, then the hex changes control and all the blocks which attacked it (fresh or spent) immediately advance and occupy it. Otherwise, they remain in their existing hexes. Only one attacking block may advance across each difficult terrain hexside, with priority given to fresh blocks and then French blocks.

SUPPLY

German blocks are in supply as long as they occupy or can trace a path of German controlled hexes to German controlled Aachen, Trier or Karlsruhe. French blocks are in supply as long as they occupy or can trace a path of Allied controlled hexes to Allied controlled Paris, Melun or Troyes. The British block is in supply as long as it occupies or can trace a path of Allied controlled hexes to Allied controlled Rouen, Amiens or Ypres. The Belgian block is in supply in the Antwerp or Ypres hexes (this matters only for victory purposes). Any blocks which are out of supply may not be reinforced and may not attack, but they suffer no further ill effects.

REPORTS

After the Combat phase, the umpire for each team returns to brief that team about what occurred. He or she goes through each hex attacked by either side, starting with the Allied attacks. For each enemy hex attacked, he or she reports the number, nationality and status (fresh or spent) of enemy blocks occupying the hex, while for each friendly hex attacked, he or she reports the nationality and location of each block attacking the hex. Reports must also include which blocks on both sides absorb hits, and any consequential changes of hex control and advances after combat. Changes to hex control and the status and location of friendly blocks are recorded on each team's map, but team members must remember what intelligence they have received about enemy forces without it being recorded on their map. Play now continues with the Orders phase of the following turn.

VICTORY

If Germany ever gains control of the Paris hex, play stops immediately and the German team wins a decisive victory. Otherwise, victory points are calculated for both teams after the Combat phase on turn 6. Each team receives one point for each friendly controlled hex in which at least one nationality of friendly block would be in supply (whether present or not). Each team also receives one point for each routed enemy block. An Allied margin of three points corresponds to the historical outcome of the campaign, so both teams can gauge whether they have done better or worse than their historical counterparts.

SET-UP

The Allies begin with one fresh Belgian block in Antwerp, one fresh British block in Ypres, one spent French block in Amiens, two fresh and one spent French blocks in Sedan, two fresh and one spent French blocks in Verdun, and two fresh and one spent French blocks in Epinal. The Germans begin with four fresh and one spent blocks in Liege, three fresh blocks in Luxembourg, two fresh and one spent blocks in Metz, and one fresh block in Strasbourg. The Germans begin in control of Liege, Luxembourg, Metz, Strasbourg, Aachen, Trier and Karlsruhe, while the Allies begin in control of the 14 other hexes. Both teams know of the initial enemy dispositions and the constraints and opportunities created by the simulation rules, and they may take them into account in their strategic planning.

EXAMPLE OF PLAY

In the Orders phase of turn 1, the Allied team reinforces the spent French block in Sedan and moves the British block to fill the gap at Le Cateau. To comply with the turn 1 constraints, four French blocks are ordered to attack Metz, two more are ordered to attack Luxembourg, and the remaining four remain inactive. The German team meanwhile chooses to reinforce the spent block in Metz, foregoes any movement, and orders attacks by two blocks on Le Cateau, four blocks on Sedan, and three blocks on Epinal. (They considered moving the unused block in Metz to Strasbourg in case the French attack there instead, but this would allow the French to inflict two hits on the Metz hex itself.)

In the Movement phase of turn 1, the reinforcements and the British move are recorded on the master map. In the Combat phase, the attack on Metz is resolved first. Since Metz has at least two fresh defenders, two of the four attacking blocks become spent - one in Epinal by priority 6, and the second in Verdun by priority 3. The four attackers do not outnumber the three defenders by two or more, so only one German block becomes spent - one of the ones due to attack Epinal by priority 1. Now the attack on Luxembourg is resolved. Again there are at least two fresh defenders, so both attacking French blocks become spent. The Germans have just one block spent - one of those due to attack Sedan by priority 1.

Now the Germans' own attacks are resolved. At Epinal, the two remaining attackers make the last fresh French block spent, at the cost of one attacking block becoming spent - the one in Strasbourg by priority 6. At Sedan, the three remaining attackers likewise make the last French block spent at the cost of one of their own - one in Liege by priority 4. Finally, the two blocks attacking Le Cateau make the British block spent in return for one of the attackers. These combats are described to both teams during the Reports phase.

With all but one of the British and French blocks now spent after these intense frontier battles, while six of the twelve German blocks remain fresh, the Allies have little option but to pull back in the north and trade space for time lest their armies be routed while vainly trying to stand their ground. However, the Germans will become increasingly exhausted by their advance, leaving them vulnerable to a counterblow by the revived Allied armies from turn 4 onwards.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Turn 1 (August 20th-24th): Battle of the Frontiers

Turn 2 (August 25th-29th): Germans capture Sedan and Le Cateau

Turn 3 (August 30th-September 3rd): Germans capture Soissons and Chalons

Turn 4 (September 4th-8th): Battle of the Marne

Turn 5 (September 9th-13th): Allies recapture Soissons and Chalons

Turn 6 (September 14th-18th): First Battle of the Aisne

DESIGN NOTES

This classic campaign presents significant challenges to the simulation designer. Modelling a situation in which the Allies attacked all-out at first, then engaged in a headlong retreat, and then turned and launched a triumphant counteroffensive, requires careful consideration of the underlying dynamics. I decided that the simplest way to reflect the fatal French combination of offensive bias and underestimation of German strength was to force them to attack initially and learn their errors the hard way. If this constraint is removed, the campaign is likely to stagnate along the French frontier as Allied reserves move north instead to block the main German thrust using more sensible defensive tactics.

It was clear from the outset that the system needed to reflect the changing effectiveness of the contending armies, and not just their changing location. Hence, as in my teaching simulations of World War Two (Google 'Sabin consim'), I decided to use wooden blocks to show the forces 'fresh' when upright and 'spent' when on their side. This allows both sides' armies to swing back and forth between fearsome readiness and abject exhaustion without a single block needing to be removed. Beyond a certain point, trying to hold ground with brittle forces will simply lead to them routing *en masse*, so players are encouraged to undertake pre-emptive retreats instead, as both sides did in the real campaign. The shifting pendulum of advantage in the campaign is reflected by boosting Allied recovery capabilities on turns 4 to 6 and by having advancing forces become spent even when unopposed.

As in my *Eastern Front* and *Hell's Gate* simulations, I use unusually big hexes so as to minimise playing piece numbers and to simplify moves and advances to just a single hex. This in turn allows more detailed local terrain features such as rivers and fortresses to be abstracted out, with only extensive obstacles such as the Ardennes and the Vosges needing to be represented. The restrictions on attack densities and coordinated attacks work better than the usual approach of limiting how many forces can occupy each individual hex. Redeployments by rail played only a secondary role within this campaign, and so can be reflected by the ability to send reinforcements to any chosen hex, while main force movement involves marching at the realistic average of 20 kilometres per day.

Resolving Allied attacks before German ones gives a good reflection of the real sequence of events (especially in the Battle of the Frontiers), and it introduces some interesting asymmetric concerns for the players. The Allies must think about how losses suffered or advances made during their own attacks will affect the resilience of their lines to possible German counterattacks - if they are not careful, they may expose their remaining spent forces to catastrophic routs. The Germans, for their part, must remember that some of their planned attacks may be pre-empted by the enemy, perhaps making their remaining attacks ineffective unless they over-insure accordingly. As the Example of Play shows, the Germans may need to attack as widely as the French on turns 1 and 2, so as to exhaust and tie down the Allies enough to provoke an early withdrawal.

Unlike in most 1914 wargames where forces are displayed openly to both sides, here the limited information inherent in the Kriegsspiel format is a central element of the simulation. The game system is actually far simpler and more abstract than in other wargames, precisely to offset the delays and logistic complications of carrying orders and reports back and forth between separate rooms. One advantage of the Kriegsspiel approach is that turns are simultaneous rather than sequential, so that one never knows how one's plans may have been affected by enemy redeployments by the time one's orders are actually carried out. A second advantage is that weaknesses evident for exploitation in a more open game may be concealed by the fog of war. In hindsight, the Germans could have seized the undefended areas around Ypres and Amiens with little effort during their initial advance, but in the game they never know if the Belgians have been pulled back there from Antwerp (as they were historically in October) or if the French have deployed a flank guard.

Most traditional wargames (including my own) use die rolls to reflect unforeseen variations and to prevent the contest being as unrealistically calculable as a game of chess. A third major advantage of the Kriegsspiel approach is that it can use limited information to achieve the same effect without subjecting players to the apparent capriciousness of dice. The combat system has been carefully designed to present players with painful dilemmas. Attacking with a single block will capture an undefended hex, but otherwise it will merely yield a snippet of intelligence at the cost of the attacking block becoming spent. Guarding a hex with a spent block will shield it against single attack adventurism, but a stronger attack will not only take the hex but also rout the defenders into the bargain. (It is never worth guarding a hex with two or more spent blocks and no fresh ones, since this will just compound any disaster.) There is always a risk (especially early on) that an attack will run into a concentration of two fresh blocks and suffer a bloody nose, or that one or two defending blocks will be attacked by three or four blocks and so sustain a double hit.

At the bigger picture level, these dilemmas force the teams to confront the realistic military challenges of outguessing the enemy and balancing offence and defence. If one simply spreads out to defend the whole front evenly, this frees the enemy to attack at places of their choosing. It may be better to take risks in some places so as to concentrate for one's own attack elsewhere, thereby putting the enemy on the back foot and reducing the chance that they will discover one's weaknesses after all.

The Kriegsspiel approach has its own limitations (such as exaggerating the actual extent of the fog of war), and it certainly brings major logistic penalties. Hence, more traditional wargame modelling remains just as valid and useful as a way of exploring the dynamics and counterfactual possibilities of campaigns like 1914. I discuss all these issues in greater depth in my book *Simulating War* (Bloomsbury, 2012), which illustrates the utility and practicalities of wargame modelling for the teaching and study of military history.

