Russian Civil War: Designer Notes

By Joseph Miranda

Russian Civil War (RCW) was a unique wargame for old-SPI, being the first in a projected series of “Power Politics” titles. It was set during the Russian Civil War of 1918-21, pitting Bolsheviks (Reds) against anti-Bolsheviks (Whites), with Nationalists (Greens) and outside intervention forces (Blue) also in the mix. James Dunnigan used a unique design feature: each player controlled units of several of those four factions, and could even fight his own forces in pursuit of an ultimate Red or White victory. RCW proved unique, since it ended up being the only SPI wargame to use the system.

RCW used chaos theory before the term gained public currency. One feature of the design was players picked chits from a “Randomizer” (coffee mug), and they could award control of various Green and Blue forces, call forth an assassin or two, or cause Blue forces to go home. One of the more fun features of the game was the Purge chit, in which players could attempt to seize control of each other’s Red leaders. All that resulted in ever-shifting coalitions fighting to bring order out of chaos.

RCW has always been one of my favorite designs. I revived the system when I designed Ottomans (focusing on the rise of the Ottoman empire in the 15th and 16th centuries) for Strategy & Tactics. When the opportunity came along to do an upgraded version of RCW, I decided to stay within the parameters of the original design. This meant no major changes to the basic game system and new elements would be integrated within that system.

Photo 1: The Baltic Front

It is mid-1919 and a German Freikorps is advancing on Riga. Trotsky reinforces the Petrograd garrison with the Latvian Rifles, a special shock unit. In Finland a German expeditionary division squares off against some Red Guards.
My basic concept was RCW is a game set in the Russian Civil War. It’s not intended as the be-all-and-end-all simulation of that conflict. Consequently, I avoided using special rules or trying to recreate every last potential situation. Instead, I stuck with the original system and went with the assumption unique situations that arose during the original conflict were the result of chaotic factors that could potentially happen in play given enough replays. For example, during the civil war the Bolsheviks created a Far Eastern Republic in Siberia. That was for a while a quasi-independent state, and I thought of adding a Randomizer chit to allow for it, but it was already accounted for by the overall game system. That is, if a player gained control of the Siberian Red units he would have de facto created the Far Eastern Republic within the context of the game. Consequently, there was no reason to have a special rule for such an event since it’s already there. To use current Pentagon jargon, RCW is an “effects based simulation.” As much as possible, special rules are represented by Randomizer chits.

Additional Red leaders & Combat Units. The Bolsheviks get a unit that starts in Finland. It represents the Red Guards who were defeated in a civil war there with Finnish Whites. There’s also a moderately strong Red unit that starts in Tashkent, Central Asia, as well as the Red leader Kolesov.
to command them. (I added Central Asia and Mongolia to the game map.)

Additional White Leaders. I gave the Whites an extra leader: Kornilov. He’s usually known for the eponymous “Kornilov Rebellion” of 1917 in which he made an attempt to toss out the Bolsheviks during the era of the Kerensky government. That attempt got bungled, but nonetheless would’ve changed the course of the 20th century had it succeeded. He later showed up in the Cossack region, where he rallied White forces during the Ice March (you get a Randomizer chit for that, by the way). Kornilov was killed early in the war, but I decided to include him given he has “name value.” I also upgraded the Yudenich leader to a “2.” He was one of the better Czarist generals, and his White army in the Baltics was considered a major threat by the Bolsheviks.

Additional White Combat Units. The Whites get a “2” in Turkestan, representing White forces in Central Asia. I upgraded the Omsk unit to a “6,” representing Kolchak’s main army, which was based in Siberia.

Red & White Shock Armies. Shock armies are special units, two Red and one White. The Red units represent the Konarmiya (cavalry army) and the Latvian Rifles (an elite Bolshevik unit, as those things were reckoned at the time). The White unit is the Volunteer Army (elite insofar as it was originally composed largely of former Czarist officers). Shock Armies are initially placed in the Randomizer, and players gain control of them by picking them. They can be placed with any player-controlled force of the same color. The advantage is they allow you to suddenly concentrate strength at a critical point. The downside is, if a Shock Army is eliminated it goes back into the Randomizer.

The Finns. In the original game, Finland (Greens) had three “6” strength combat units. That made them one of the strongest forces in the game. Granted, the Finns had a good fighting reputation, but even so, that was way beyond their capabilities at this time in history. Indeed, in 1918 they needed the support of a German expeditionary division (under the redoubtable Gen. Rudiger von der Goltz—not to be confused with the Colmar von der Goltz who commanded the Ottoman Army in World War I) to help them win their own civil war against Red Guards (though perhaps the Germans were figured into the total strength in the original RCW). Anyway, I reduced the Finns to two “6” units, which is still strong but not overwhelming. The German expeditionary force is now shown as a separate unit (more about them later). Another thing about Finland: I thought about dividing the province into two sub-areas, representing the historic division between Red Finns in the south and White Finns in the center and north. I dropped that idea because, given the nature of the replacement system, it would’ve caused anomalies when it came to replacing Finnish Green units on the map.

Trans-Caucasus. There were three Trans-Caucasus states: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the old game there were two Trans-Caucasus units; I added a third so each of those states would have their own army.

Central Asia. When the Russian Empire fell apart, representatives of the various Central Asian provinces met at Tashkent and made their bid for independence. They lacked much in the way of an army, and the Bolsheviks quickly crushed them. That turned out to be only the start of the fighting. As Islamic insurgents gave the Reds problems during several more years of fighting. I gave the Central Asians three units, each in separate provinces, representing the Basmachi insurgents. That makes for an interesting dilemma for the Reds. While they have one moderately good unit in Central Asia (a “4”), it can’t be everywhere at once. So, even if the Reds crush one Central Asian unit, the other two will be able to regain lost ground. The Reds will have to bring in an army from somewhere else to consolidate Central Asia, but that may detract from operations elsewhere.

The Mongols. There was a brief Mongolian civil war, with assorted Nationalist, radical and Chinese armies involved, not to mention the Russian warlord Baron Ungern-Sternberg (more about him later). In the game the Mongols get one Red and one Green unit, with a combat strength of “2” each.

Blue Units. The outside Intervention forces got a major overhaul, as follows.

Central Powers. In the original game they were referred to as “Germans,” but I changed them to “Central Powers” in order to be able to include the Austro-Hungarian occupation force in Russia. I also upgraded them from the old game’s original “2” combat strength to “3s” as a reflection of their relative combat effectiveness (bear in mind each Central Powers unit represents up to a corps). I also added two additional units: one in Finland and one in Kutais. The former represents the German expeditionary force sent to support Finnish Whites against the Reds, and the latter is another expeditionary force that was dispatched to the Caucasus to seize control of (what else?) the oil fields there. That later expedition led to an odd situation in which the Germans found themselves confronting their erstwhile Turkish ally around Baku. In the standard rules, Central Powers units may not move or attack, since they were mainly occupation forces; however, I included an optional that can give a player control of the German units in Finland and Kutais.

The Czechs. This is the famous Czech Legion, made up of former prisoners of war from the Austro-Hungarian Army. The Legion fought its way across Siberia, set up local governments, and generally made life difficult for the Bolsheviks. I considered making them stronger than they were in the old game (their three units are a mediocre “3” each), but instead gave them a couple special abilities in the Optional Rules to represent their political acumen, such as making them immune to subversive attack.

French. The French got reorganized: they now have one unit that starts in Murmansk and one in Vladivostok. They represent small French formations that were sent to these regions while World War I was still in progress.
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When the Armistice occurs (via Randomizer chit draw), the French get three reinforcement units that land in Kherson and the Crimea (Taurida), representing a Franco-Greek corps.

British. The British start the game with units in Archangel, Murmansk, Baku, Turkestan and Vladivostok. They represent various contingents, generally of brigade size, of British, Indian and Canadian troops. The Baku unit is “Dunsterforce,” the motorized flying column that drove up from Mesopotamia through Persia. The British get two reinforcement units in the Caucasus. They’re slightly stronger than their other units, as they’re actually divisions that were deployed from India to protect the independence of the Caucasus states.

Romanians. The Romanian unit now appears in Bessarabia, representing the corps they sent there to secure it. I also upgraded the strength of the Romanian unit from a “1” to a “2” (it is a corps).

Turks. Ottoman Turkey was part of the Central Powers, but I showed them as a separate force because they got into loggerheads with the Germans over (again, what else?) Caucasus oil. Anyway, the Turks start the game with two units in Kars, representing their Army of Islam, which reclaimed some Caucasus territories in the wake of the collapse of the Czarist armies. Later, in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman government, the Turks signed a treaty of alliance with the Bolsheviks, as they both had common interests in countering Allied influence in the Middle East. That kind of situation is reflected in RCW’s design. For example, a player

Photo 3: Siberia

Siberia is the scene of conflict along the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Red forces in Ekaterinberg are reinforced by an armored train; they hold the Czar prisoner, waiting for word of his fate from the Politburo. Opposing them is the Czech Legion (blue) and Admiral Kolchak. The latter has control of the Russian gold reserve. Farther east, various Allied (blue) contingents have landed at Vladivostok. In Mongolia, anarchist forces (black) are squaring off against both Reds and local nationalists.
might gain control of the Turks and use them in opposition to another player who might control the British and French. I considered allowing Blue and Green forces to fight each other under certain circumstances, but in the end decided that would have led to too many special rules to deal with obscure situations; so I dropped the idea.

**United States.** No changes were made here. The Americans get one unit in Archangel and two in Siberia, each representing a reinforced regiment. That means the US units are some of the strongest per factor in the game. That goes back to the thesis combat strength represents combat effectiveness as opposed to firepower. In comparison, each French division is represented by a “2” unit, since the units they sent to Russia were falling apart owing to low morale and subversion in the ranks.

**Japanese.** Again, no changes were made. The Japanese had the single largest intervention force: 78,000 men. They spent much of their time consolidating Tokyo’s position in the Far East, confronting the Americans over control of the railroads, and sometimes supporting the Whites.

**Chinese.** The Chinese get one unit that shows up in Mongolia, representing a warlord army that marched there historically and made a claim for it.

**Free Korps.** The Free Korps were those veterans of the German army who, in the wake of the Armistice, decided they wanted to keep the war going and so marched east to take on the Bolsheviks and just about anyone else who go in their way. In the game the Free Korps is represented by two “4” strength combat units that appear in the Baltic when the Armistice occurs and the Central Powers withdraw their occupation armies. The Free Korps units represent the *Iron Division* and the *Baltic Landwehr* (later renamed the *West Russian Army*) that, despite their names, were largely German formations. The whole shooting match was under the command of von der Goltz, who by that time was getting a reputation for fighting Bolsheviks. The Free Korps can be a real threat to the Bolsheviks since, if a pro-White player gains control of it, they can threaten Petrograd.

**Allied Major Intervention Forces.** They are three “6” strength units representing a full-scale Allied attempt to overthrow the Reds. If the players agree, those units can be added to the game. This is a strong force, but the
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kicker is, if a player gains control of this force, he must win a White victory.

**Anarchists (Black).** This is a fifth faction, hostile to all other factions and beyond player control. There are five such units. One represents the Revolutionary Insurrection Army of the Ukraine of Nestor Makhno. I gave it a combat strength of “5,” mainly because no other unit in the game has a strength of five – thereby making it unique. There is also a “4” strength unit representing the Kronstadt Rebels (since they were crushed by the Bolsheviks, I didn’t think they were up to the level of the Makhno force that gave both the Whites and Reds a run for their money). Then there are three “2” strength units, representing various minor uprisings as well as the forces of independent warlords such as the aforementioned Ungern-Sternberg. He set himself up as the savior of Russia from his stronghold in Siberia, then proceeded to take over Mongolia and generally made himself a thorn in the side of everyone else until he ended his career in front of a Bolshevik firing squad.

**Green & Blue leaders.** There aren’t any in the game. I kicked around the idea of including some of the more prominent Nationalist and Interventionist leaders, such as Mannerheim, Pilsudski and even the American Gen. Graves. I dropped the idea for a couple reasons. One was it would’ve been too much of a change in the system. It also would’ve led to some historical anomalies, such as players using their assassins to knock off those leaders. I assumed their capabilities were figured into the combat values of their units as well as the integral ability of Green and Blue units to move.

**Armored Trains.** Last but certainly not least, what would a wargame on the Russian Civil War be without armored trains? There are three of these units, initially placed in the Randomizer and, like Shock Armies, going to the players who pick them. Armored trains give stacks their stacks a couple special capabilities. One is they stack free, which means their combat value of “3” can be used as a bonus. The other is they allow for limited movement through enemy stacks. That was historical, since armored trains allowed armies to punch through enemy defenses. It also deals with a shortcoming of the original design, in that it was possible to have your
entire army up on the front, and often
in some obscure location, without
having to worry about your rear
area. Armored trains, by allowing a
kind of infiltration movement, give
players a reason to guard their lines
of communication. It does so without
adding rules to force that outcome,
but instead uses one game system to
provide multiple historical effects.

Others
As noted, French units represent
Greeks as well as some other minor
Allied contingents, such as Serbs.
Generally, I included the Allied minor
powers within the strengths of the
majors, since they were dependent
on them for command and supply.
Moreover, including additional Blue
forces would’ve meant more Control
and Withdrawal chits, thereby
overloading the Randomizer.

Still, there were other forces I would’ve
liked to have gotten into the game, but
decided the scale didn’t warrant it. For
example, there was an Italian Legion
that proved its worth in the fighting in
Siberia, but since they worked with the
Czechs I ended up assuming they were
part of the Czech units in the game.
There was also a Swedish contingent
but, again, I figured their strength
was included in the Finnish forces.
There was even a Jewish regiment
that fought the Bolsheviks in Siberia.

Another unit I considered adding was
an Enver Pasha leader. He was the
Ottoman defense minister responsible
for a string of Turkish disasters in
World War I. After the Ottoman sur-
render he ended up in Moscow and
suddenly started talking like a radical.
The Bolsheviks were impressed enough
to send him to Central Asia to win over
the Islamic guerrillas who were giving
them a hard time. Upon arrival, Enver
promptly defected and ended up as an
insurgent leader before being killed in
action. I thought about adding him as a
Green leader placed in the Randomizer,
but dropped the idea because it
would’ve meant too many special rules
for someone who’d showed up only
after most of the fighting was over.