

Estonia 2029

Onside Report

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The genesis for this game came from a map I drew in the early stages of the Russo-Ukraine war when it looked like the Russians might, after taking Lysychansk, push on into the rest of Donetsk. I drew out a nodal map of the key towns which it seemed they might take, and connected the nodes by what looked like the likely avenues of advance between each town. At the time I had vague ideas that the map might form the basis of a game, but as it was the Russian advance got bogged down in Bakhmut and the map was filed away. Fast forward to the present and the fighting is now evolving around several of the towns at the edge of the grid such as Kostiantynivka, Pokrovsk and Kramatorsk.

One issue that these battles raised, and which even prompted Anthony King to consider revising his original thesis in *Urban Warfare in the 21st Century* that urban battle would dominate in the future (King, 2021), was that a lot of the fighting was actually rural (King, 2025). This interlinking between rural and urban warfare in the Ukraine, and in potentially other future wars, has likewise fascinated me, and been something which I felt that my PhD ought to consider. This would mean a wargame at a more operational scale, giving players the choice of fighting through urban centres, or ignoring them, or fighting in the rural in order to help win the towns and cities.

I initially tried to work the game up around my topological model, and moved it from Ukraine to Estonia in order not to be outpaced by events, but soon switched to a hex map. However, the urban nodes themselves weren't just regular hexes but split to reflect the zones of the city in an abstract way (something I think I saw years ago in a Dstl urban wargame). I didn't want urban hexes to be simple +1 for urban but to become foci of activity in their own right. At the scale of map this would be too much detail for one hex, and none of the urban settlements would be multi-hex (15km per hex), so after briefly playing with the idea of embedding larger hexes in the map for the BUAs (built-up areas) I decided to make use of some 9cm MDF squares I had (essentially beer mats) to represent the BUAs off map, with the convenience of just needing to layout the BUAs currently being fought over. That seemed to work nicely (although expanded to 14cm MDF squares for better playability), so with the mapping sorted I moved onto the rest of the rules.

As an operational game OPUC (as the core game system is currently called) should explore the issues facing a Corps or Division Commander. This means issues like logistics, managing deep fires, identifying major thrusts, the civilian population, and

how the campaign is playing out politically and in the media. The actual combat should be relatively straightforward so as to free player headspace for these and other issues, and once given direction the lower level commanders should be trusted to fight the enemy in front of them. The main things I wanted to model were that:

- Urban fights could take on a life of their own, and become more than just the classic +1 for urban, +2 for dense urban.
- Civil effects needed to be represented. In previous games I'd done this based on complicated icons on a CRT, or looking for doubles, but this time hit upon the idea of just placing "Civil Effects Check" tokens whenever heavy weapons are used, but not breaking the flow of the game, and then at the end of turn using simple die rolls to generate the civil effects, including power and water/sewerage outages, rubble, displaced persons (DPs) and civilian deaths.
- DPs don't just come from the urban centre under attack, but also from neighbouring centres as they realise that they might be next.
- Logistics is a vital consideration at the operational level, particularly when urban combat is estimated to take x3 – x10 the resources (Antal, 2003; Spencer & Geroux, 2021; Spencer & Geroux, 2022; Spencer et al, 2023), and so LOG points are the main unit of currency for combat activity in the game, not Command Points.
- Ukraine is showing the vital role that really Deep Fires (not the UK's piddling 30km with MLRS until PrSM or son-of-PrSM comes on-line) play in campaigning, and so I split Fires into Local Fires by units on the map and Deep Fires from theatre or home base resources and targeted at more strategic assets.
- The divisional or corps commander has no real influence over what is happening in the air, or in the Baltic Sea, or on their flanks in Latvia and Lithuania, but all of these will have an impact on their own operations, such as the ability to use certain types of ISR, to get air support, and the ability to get resupply and reinforcement. So a simple die roll sets a state for each of these, which can then "drift" to a permanent supremacy for one side or the other, and their impacts are reflected in the rules.

A few elements that I streamlined from previous games were:

- There is an undifferentiated pool of ISR points, and one roll of a bucket of dice then tell you which you can apply against hard to spot targets, which against other targets, and which are fails.
- Only a single combat factor is now used. For added simplicity I used a "columbia blocks" type approach, where combat factors are around the edge of the block so that you can easily show degrades in performance (Sabin, 2012) – although maintaining correct orientation as units are Unhidden and Hidden again might be proving too problematic.

- Choosing capability cards seems to always take an age, so I kept command actions to a simple list on each sides' dashboard. There is a temptation to keep adding options, but hopefully I can keep this in check!
- In order not to clutter the board too much with small engineering units the higher level (e.g. Engr Bn) unit is on the board, but its columbia numbers show how many Engineering Detachments it can provide, and simple chits for these are placed on the board within a distance only when used.

In a first outing of the game at Kings Wargaming Week I had fixed initiative each turn for the attacker (Russians). I've now made this a dice-off (after the first turn), but both sides can spend a CP point to get a +1DM, and there are also DMs for each enemy unit destroyed and town taken – so hopefully initiative should start to flow to the side that is “winning”.

For the COW scenario we only played the Russian 44th Corps attack up from the SE into the soft underbelly of Estonia. Fighting across the Narva is considered to be a huge challenge (and the site of many previous battles), so in a long notice scenario this southerly approach may be more likely. It also gives the Russians the options to both head cross country for Tallinn, taking the capital and splitting the country in two, and/or striking due W for the coast and severing Estonia from any NATO support through Latvia.

ISR and Fires on both sides did some limited unveiling and damage, and a plucky Estonia scout regiment tried to hold the border against the massed Russian hordes. The Russians planned some strategic jamming for Turn 2 to reduce NATO's Command Points (CPs), but NATO conducted its own Special Forces strike against the 44th Corps HQ which denied it any CPs that turn – although then rolled so badly for their own points that the Russian jamming reduced them to zero too! NATO also felt the absence of Deep Fires, often only having a couple of air-strikes to project power, and both sides suffered from attrition in Deep Fires and ISR (rolling 1s). In turn 2 Russia was spending LOG points to push its armoured columns south of Voru against another Estonian battalion, whilst NATO was stockpiling LOG in Voru ready for the impending fight. They also got an evacuation underway to get civilians out. Both sides deployed tactical EW, but with limited impact. On Turn 3 the Russian hammer fell against the Estonians in Voru, artillery fire softening them up and neutralising them, and then a reinforced Motor Rifle Regiment moved up to the town and two of its battalions took on the Estonians and eliminated them. The end of turn Civil Effects Check revealed that much of the town had been rubblised and both power and water/sewerage were off. There were no DPs from Toru (the timely evacuation) but the fight in Voru prompted DPs to start fleeing from Valga and Tartu – causing potential blockages in due course.

At that point we called a halt and went into a discussion about the game. A lot better received than City & CEMA and several commenting that it hit a sweet spot in terms of complexity and playability for this level of game. It was also commented that although

my focus was on urban the game would work for more general modern campaign scenarios. No comments this time about too much dice rolling (which was good), although players realised that they were protected from many of the detailed rules as I adjudicated each combat (but I think that DM tables are quite straightforward and wouldn't take long for some to get comfortable with). The range of CP and artillery missions were appreciated, although some CP costs were debated (e.g. the expensive SF mission). In terms of more detailed mechanics, it was felt that Artillery ought to be able to re-hide in place, rather than have to move, as each hex is 15km x 15km. Evan suggested that air strikes ought to be disaggregated from other Fires – which I originally had, so I may revisit. Evan also thought that ISR could be target by target rather than done as roll first, assign later – which is what I originally had in City & CEMA but took up so much time – but no reason why it shouldn't be left as an option for the player.

Lots of other points were flagged, and I'll work to review those, but the most important things was that most of the players seemed to enjoy the game. I'll now look to do a final cycle of refinement and then get the game out as a beta, both as print'n'play, and probably more usefully, on Tabletop Simulator (and even in Mixed Reality!).

A fuller set of Designer's Notes, and hopefully a fuller and evolving Game Provenance document which provides the sources for most of the data and rules, can be found on the games homepage at <http://www.taunoyen.com/games/opuc>. The Tabletop Simulator version should available by the time this Onside comes out.

Thanks as always to everyone who played in and commented on the session, and completed the survey forms – all very constructive and I'll use all the observations and ideas to further refine OPUC and to help inform my PhD research.

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