

# The Rhineland War

WHAT IF: WAR OVER THE RHINELAND, 1936 | The Jiangxi Soviet | RAF Bomber Command | Merrill's Marauders

## WORLD at WAR

The Strategy & Tactics of World War II



### Rhineland 1936

#### RHINELAND WAR PLAYERS' NOTES

by Joseph Miranda

The alternative history assumption in RW is France challenged Germany when Hitler ordered his army to occupy the Rhineland in March 1936. A general European war follows, bringing in the various powers on one side or the other.

The game map stretches from Spain to the Polish-Soviet frontier. I designed it that way, as opposed to concentrating on just the potential campaign within the Rhineland, to show the larger geo-strategic context. Players have to deal with a situation fraught not only operational potential, but one also brimming with variable diplomatic and political factors.

First, then, know that if you try to play *Rhineland War* (RW) as if it were set in 1939-40, you will lose the game if you're going up against a competent opponent. This is 1936, before the panzers and the *Luftwaffe* were tested in the Spanish Civil War, before the British built up Fighter Command, before anyone in Europe was ready to fight another world war.

#### PATH TO VICTORY

You win the game by controlling Crisis and Mobilization hexes. Crisis hexes are worth 10 points each while Mobilization hexes are worth their respective recruit values, which range from one to three. You'll notice that makes, say, the Rhineland, Memel or the Sudetenland worth more points than Berlin or Paris. I

designed the game that way intentionally. Players have to think in terms of the 1930s, in which the European powers were maneuvering for dominance of the continent by taking over critical regions, and *not* in terms of the total war of the 1940s. That's something I see as being vital in good game design: giving players the perspectives of their historic predecessors. It's especially true in an alternative history game such as RW because of the divergence it otherwise presumes with the historical record.

As you can see from looking at the game map, Crisis hexes range from the Rhineland (Hitler's first bloodless conquest), through Spanish Civil War battlegrounds (Guernica, Madrid), to the Balkans and everything in between (the Sudetenland, Danzig, Vienna for the Anschluss, the ever popular Ploesti oilfields, and much more).

The way I got all the diplomacy and a lot of other things into RW was via the venerable random-pick chit system. They can bring in various powers into an alliance, giving the receiving player control of those armies. The chits can also give various military advantages, such as Shock Effect, which enhances combat. Players have to keep their options open. You never know what front will open up or who will be on your side. One critical chit brings in the Red Army. It's a fairly powerful force since Stalin hasn't yet had the opportunity to wreck it with purges. Since the Red Army can come in on either side, it can be the wild card in the game.

Both sides are on shaky political ground. There are three each of Putsch, General Strike, and Red Army Purge crisis chits in the pool. If they're picked, die rolls are triggered during the crisis phase for each type. If a roll is less than or equal to the number in play of the corresponding chit, the Germans, the Allies, or the Soviet Union will be affected, respectively. The force affected loses its replacements and reinforcements for the remainder of the game. The idea is there's been a crisis on the home front that undermines the military effort. In the original draft of the game, the result of such failed die roll checks was that the Germans or Allies instantly lost the game, or the Red Army was completely pulled out. Play testing showed that to be too much, with the game always coming down to a few inescapable die rolls. I therefore changed it so the fighting continues, albeit with a heavy penalty, and you still have a chance of salvaging something, especially since your opponent might also be facing a home front crisis.

That has implications for strategy in the game. You pick a number of Crisis chits

# The Rhineland War



each turn depending on the number of Crisis hexes your forces control on the map: the more hexes, the more picks. That's a two-edged sword. While most of the chits provide you with positive outcomes, such as alliances or additional combat power, they can backfire if you push it too far and thereby increase the probability of picking a Putsch, General Strike or Red Army Purge. The idea is, given the nature of politics in the 1930s, governments had to deal with strong internal forces that were opposed to pushing crises into another general war. In western Europe there were considerable anti-war, radical and often pro-German movements. In Germany, Hitler was willing to gamble but the generals and even some top Nazi Party officials (like Goering) were none too sanguine about what might happen if he brought on another war. There's considerable evidence a faction among the German generals would've launched a coup had Britain and France stood firm as late as the Munich conference.

Players, therefore, have to take calculated risks. You can take things far, but if you get to the point one of the big crises hit you, you

may find yourself well out on the proverbial limb. Obviously, the longer you can delay that break point the better. Then again, you might want to push offensive play early on in order to generate a crisis for the other side. It's what a later generation would call brinkmanship, and it also underscores the issue of national morale in warfare, something that often doesn't get into simulations.

## WHICH WAY

For the German player, the obvious early strategy is to go east to overrun Poland and then the Baltic states. Those countries are easy targets because of the lack of natural defenses in that part of Europe, and you can easily pick up three Crisis hexes among them. Other fronts are more problematic. To the south are Czechoslovakia and Austria, with three more Crisis hexes. Both of them have considerable amounts of rough terrain on their borders, and the Czechs also have strong fortress units. The Austrians are actually more vulnerable, since their military is weaker, but on the other hand there is an even chance of the Germans getting

Austria as an ally by picking its Crisis chit. Since that also gives you control of the Austrian Army, it's something worth considering.

That brings up another point about considering whether to invade a country. Picking its Crisis chit may otherwise bring it onto your side as any ally, while an invasion pushes it into the enemy camp. For example, Poland can potentially become a German ally if that player picks the Poland chit and hasn't invaded France. Similarly, if the Allies pick the Italy chit and the Germans have invaded France, Austria or Switzerland, the Italians become an Allied power. You have to consider that if you get too aggressive against certain countries it will also bring third parties in against you. Therefore there's also good reason for the Germans to hold off on an attack against Poland.

That brings in the other big issue for the Germans: whether to invade France. Wargamers, I think, are generally predisposed to thinking in terms of the inevitability of a German invasion of France, but in RW there are a couple reasons to avoid such a campaign. One is the Maginot Line defenses make such an invasion difficult. Another is there really isn't all that much reason to invade France in the first place. It has only one Crisis hex, Alsace-Lorraine, and that's right on the border. As mentioned, invading France might also potentially pit Poland and/or Italy against the Reich. About the best reason for the Germans to invade France is it might provide a way to get units into the Spanish Civil War if it breaks out, or even drive as far as Gibraltar (which will prevent the British from using their naval power in the Mediterranean).

As for the Allied player, he has to exploit opportunities as they arise. For example, getting control of one or two countries in the Balkans can make a major difference as there are four Crisis hexes in the region, or five if Trieste is counted. Mussolini can be a real ally here if the Germans have pushed him into your camp. Another thing to consider is Allied sea power. The British have the Royal Navy, and the Allies have considerable amphibious transport capacity, especially when you take into account the French Navy. The Allies can get some reasonable forces into the Balkans by landing on the long coastline and then pushing inland.

Another thing for the Allies to do is wait for the Germans to over commit themselves. The Reich will have extreme difficulty in 1936 in fighting a multi-front war. It simply doesn't have the units. If the German player opens up too many fronts, the *Wehrmacht* will find itself vulnerable on at least one of them. While the





German Army is better than any single foe, it lacks the depth needed for sustained conflict. The Germans receive reinforcements in the course of the game, but they still won't be enough to fight a war on the scale of 1939.

Another thing for the Allied player to consider is Britain starts the game neutral. That reflects the politics of the time, in which the British public and much of the government didn't want to be stampeded into another European war as in 1914, as well as the extreme unpreparedness of the British armed forces (I discuss this in detail in the magazine article, including the infamous Ten Year Rule.) Yet another thing the Allied player needs to look at is keeping Crisis hexes occupied, since that will increase the odds of picking the Great Britain chit. Also, even if the Germans pick the chit, Britain still enters play on the Allied side; so a string of German successes might backfire on them.

## OPERATIONAL ASPECTS

Take a look at the sequence of play. It's composed of mobilization, terror bombing,

movement, combat, rally and crisis phases. There's no second movement impulse for the mechanized to exploit. Your armies are at the operational level of the late Great War and early 1920s. Still, there's potential for decisive action. There are two combat results tables (CRT): Attrition and Mechanized. You can use the Mechanized CRT if you have mechanized-class units in an attack. That produces fewer losses and gives the potential of a multi-hex advance after combat. Depending on the result, the advance can be one, two or three hexes. If you have your mechanized units in the right position, they can exploit such results to drive deep, but that depends on rolling the result in the first place. Effectively, you're seeing the campaign from the perspective of the 1930s, when the nuts and bolts of armored warfare were still to be worked out. Think of the various military controversies generated during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) over the use of tanks and airpower, and how different militaries went different ways concerning them. The Germans developed panzer divisions and the *schwerpunkt* concept; the Red Army

broke up its mechanized corps and instead used its tanks for infantry support.

Which brings me to the use of airpower. There are three basic uses for air units in the game: ground support, combat air patrol (CAP), and terror bombing. Ground support is fairly standard: committing an air unit to an attack gives you a column shift. You may use no more than one air unit per attack because of the command control situation. This is before this Spanish Civil War gave anyone much experience in air/ground coordination, and many of the lessons from the Great War had been forgotten in the interim. CAP lets you put an air unit over a hex, which gives you a shot at intercepting intruders. That means you have to anticipate where the enemy will be using airpower. Again, that gets back to the command control situation in the mid-1930s: nobody was prepared to make Battle of Britain-type interceptions.

Terror bombing reflects what a lot of people thought an air war was going to be about: mass attacks against military and civilian targets. You can get some extreme results via terror bombing, such as eliminating the defensive

# The Rhineland War

advantage of a city or negating a ground unit's zone of control. What that represents is the psychological impact of airpower. As events would later demonstrate, the bombers of the time lacked the hitting power to really do much damage, but there was a general fear of aerial attack, often bordering on visions of the apocalyptic. The 1936 science fiction movie, *Things to Come*, based on a work by H.G. Wells, depicts a general European war starting in 1940 in which airpower pretty much destroys civilization, and it ends with technocrats rebuilding society along scientific lines.

Terror bombing is sometimes worth the gamble. If you succeed, the bombers can often open up the enemy front. Remember, a targeted unit's zone of control disappears and, since terror bombing is executed prior to movement, you can then have your mobile units rampage through the gaps. Another use for terror bombing is, if you have no other way to strike at the enemy, you can attack his cities in order to knock out their replacement capacity.

As you can see, a world war starting in 1936 may degenerate into a conflagration' so be prepared. On the other hand, astute exploitation of crises can cause the other side to collapse without a general bloodbath. Either way, RW gives you the opportunity to explore what could've happened had the Allies confronted Hitler in that fateful year of 1936.







## ORDER OF BATTLE ANALYSIS: THE RHINELAND WAR

by Joseph Miranda

Doing the order of battle for *Rhineland War* required considerable research, since I was dealing with the pre-1939 era, which isn't that well documented. Fortunately there were some useful sources. But the real challenge lay in determining not just the numeric strengths of European armed forces in the late 1930s but their true underlying capabilities.

### FORCES

Units in RW are "chunky," to use a term popularized by Ty Bomba. They're mainly armies, with some mechanized (armor, motorized) corps and divisions and a few specialized smaller units. The Germans are a special case, as their basic formation is the infantry corps, along with their panzer, motorized and light divisions. I portrayed the Germans that way to reflect the *Wehrmacht's* higher degree of command control and training. You'll notice, though, that while the Germans are good there just aren't that many of them: they start the game with seven mechanized divisions, 12 infantry corps and some smaller formations. That initial unit scarcity unavoidably has impact on the German player's strategy. While he's able to take Crisis hexes, holding them is another matter, as there aren't enough troops to be everywhere in strength. One reason I included a couple security units in the German order of battle was to free up the regular combat units for other missions.

Most countries' primary units are infantry armies. I portrayed them that way because it reflects the cumbersome command control procedures of the time. Most general staffs were still thinking in terms of big unit war as in 1918. It also models the limitations of 1930s logistics in terms of deploying forces on a continental scale. There are a few specialized units, such as armored divisions and mountain corps. They represent the relative mobilized-

for-war potentials of each power; so they're shown in finer detail. In some cases a single unit might represent several other formations; for example, the Romanian *Mountain Corps* also represents that country's cavalry. For the French, much of their armor was in infantry support battalions and brigades, and they're factored into their infantry armies' attack factors. Independent armored units are shown separately, which gives them some offensive capability when using the Mechanized CRT.

Another thing you can see from the game is the woeful state of preparedness of the French and British armed forces at that time. The French have potential, but they have to wait several turns for all their forces to mobilize. The British are worse off in 1936 than they were 1914; for example, they don't have an Expeditionary Force (BEF) at the start of play, though they can build one in the course of a scenario. Similarly, they start off weak in airpower, though they do receive aerial reinforcements, the latter including a static anti-aircraft unit that provides some defense for the home islands. The British AAA represents the air defense command the RAF historically set up in the wake of the Rhineland Crisis.

Some of the minor powers have reasonably effective armed forces. For example, the Czechs, with their fortification units, have some real defensive capacity. It makes for some speculation as to what would've happened had they resisted Hitler over the Sudetenland crisis. The Czechs, along with the Italians and Poles, have air units and, given the nature of the airpower rules, they can make them real assets as allies.

In the historic World War II, the Polish, Czech and Italian armies' performances were lackluster at best. That was because the Poles by 1939 were outclassed by the Germans while also having to deal with the Soviets coming from the east; the Czechs had capitulated owing to great power machinations before the shooting started; and the Italians had been burned out fighting wars in Ethiopia and Spain. In 1936 they all still have potential; so players must give those countries due respect in their planning.

### FACTORS

Units in RW have attack-defense-movement factors. That's fairly standard stuff, though a couple points need to be made. Mechanized-class units (armor, motorized, armored cavalry) can use the Mechanized CRT. It gives a different range of results than the Attritional CRT used by non-mechanized attackers. For example, mechanized combat has "panic" results, which cause multi-hex retreats, while the Attrition Table has the ever popular "bloodbath" outcome. Another advantage inherent in the Mechanized CRT is the potential for multi-hex advances after combat. The effect is mechanized units become qualitatively different from the non-mechanized, something players will need to consider when allocating units to various fronts.

Movement represents not only how far and fast a unit can go in a period of time, but also various command control and logistical factors. German infantry corps are a little more mobile in the game because their leadership and training was generally better than that of other countries' armies.

The Waffen SS divisions are slower than the regular army. Hitler at the time favored the army over the Nazi Party troops; so the SS wasn't getting full logistical support. Therefore, don't think of the SS in the game as elite assault troops. And, yes, I included some extra "what if" SS divisions as an option, though at a cost to the regulars. That was mainly to explore the possibility of a higher levels of German mobilization and motorization.

The German 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Panzer Divisions have an extra point of attack strength. Both those units are received as reinforcements. The idea is they would've been equipped with better tanks, say a higher proportion of Panzer IIIs and early IVs just coming off the assembly lines. Originally, I was going to have a refit rule in which all German panzer divisions would be flipped to a higher strength midway through the game, but I decided factoring that into the reinforcements was an easier and probably more realistic approach. Similarly,

# The Rhineland War



the German air reinforcements represent not so much additional production as Me-109s and Ju-87 Stukas coming on line and increasing the effectiveness of the *Luftwaffe*.

The Germans get three anti-aircraft (flak) divisions. They represent the extensive AAA forces the *Luftwaffe* deployed, which had considerable potential on the defense, as well as German preparedness for an air war. They're static units; so once placed they may not be moved. They're useful in garrisoning critical cities in the Reich.

There's also a German airborne regiment that's received as a reinforcement. The Germans actually did have an experimental airborne unit in 1936, but it wasn't prepared for combat; so I made the turn of appearance be determined by a die roll. I used similar randomization of reinforcements for other units. They were formations not yet organized in 1936, but that could've been mobilized if a war had broken out at that time. Other units are received according to a fixed schedule, such as several of the French armies. They were reserve formations in existence at the time that would've been mobilized if war had broken out. An interesting historical aside here is one reason the French military didn't want to send a force into the Rhineland to oppose Hitler's move there was any such intervention would've required the entire army to have been mobilized, something France could ill afford economically or politically at the time.

## FOREIGN LEGIONS

Several of the major powers get expeditionary forces. They include the German *Condor Legion*, Soviet international volunteers, and an Italian mobile corps. They're units that were historically committed in the Spanish Civil War. In the game they can stack and fight with units of other nationalities on the same side. That makes them highly valuable in certain situations. (You will note units of different countries are otherwise prohibited from directly cooperating with each other. Again, that represents the command control situation as well as various political factors and the fact alliances and logistical cooperation were still to be fully worked out.)

Expeditionary units begin the game in the replacement box. You have to build them from replacement points to get them into play. Since they were specialized formations, I didn't want to make have automatically received as reinforcements, though the rule actually gives you strategic latitude concerning when they enter play.

Other expeditionary forces include the BEF and the American Volunteer Group (AVG), the latter being an air unit. Historically the US government formed such a group in 1941 (in a type of early covert operation), which was supposed to support the Chinese against Japan. Pearl Harbor intervened, however, and the AVG ended up as a conventional unit

popularly known as the "Flying Tigers." They're in the game if the United States Crisis Chit is picked by the Allies, representing Washington sending aid to anti-German forces even if only in the form of planes and civilian contract pilots. It's a bit of a stretch, but not entirely unlikely, and any anomalies are taken care of by the possibility the Allied player won't pick that lone chit during the course of a game.

The Soviet military is also cause for speculation. Remember, this is before Stalin decimated the Red Army officer corps with his purges, and at a time when the Soviet armed forces were pushing cutting edge concepts in operational warfare. Consequently their army in the game has several powerful mechanized corps and some offensive-oriented infantry armies. There's also an airborne corps (actually, a division-sized unit) plus air units. Since the Soviet mechanized units potentially can get as much exploitation movement as the Germans or anyone else, they can really take ground once they get moving. Those units can be controlled by either player depending on how the Crisis chits fall.

The Spanish Civil War is in RW — how could a wargame set in 1930s Europe not have the Republicans and Nationalists? Their units aren't particularly strong. Historically they were largely militia-type forces, at least at the start of the conflict. There's also the assumption a general European war has broken out, thus neither Spanish faction will be receiving the arms and support they received from the major powers. Even so, Spain, with a couple Crisis hexes, can become an important front.

I included some political units: a German Reich Labor Service (RAD) formation, Italian Blackshirts, and some Spanish militia on both sides. Those units reflect the use of paramilitary formations at the time, before things became more professionalized. There's also a historical detail in the fact the French high command in 1936 counted RAD personnel as part of the strength of *Wehrmacht*. They did so because they believed the French military wasn't up to fighting a war at the time; so they sought to deter their own government from getting too militaristic in their response to the German occupation of the Rhineland.

You can see RW provides a snapshot of the armed forces of Europe at the time of one of the great "what ifs" of history: what if the Allies decided to stop Hitler at the beginning of the Nazi march of conquest?