

The Battle for Budapest (Part I)

By Darren Makepeace and Richard Marsh

Background

In December 1944 Operation 'Wacht Am Rhine' blew open the Allied soft underbelly in the North West of Europe, punching a hole in the frontline through the Ardennes Forest, with the intention of driving on toward the coast and splitting the Allies armies in two.

At the same time, Army Group South on the Eastern front was bracing itself for the onslaught of the Red Army offensive, gathering pace again from the self imposed pause following the hugely successful 'Operation Bagration' in the summer months. The Germans were determined to hang on to Hungary and the last of the oilfields situated there to keep their war machine running.

From December 1944 through January and February 1945 one of the longest sieges of the war was fought over one of Europe's oldest capitals, Budapest. The fighting in and around the city, and the relief attempts to lift the siege were to be the graveyard of many German divisions, such as the battle hardened 271st Infantry Division (redesignated *Volksgrenadier*), the 13th Panzer Division, the 8th Waffen SS 'Florian Geyer' Cavalry Division and the 22nd Waffen SS 'Maria Theresa' Cavalry Division, as well as spelling the death knell of the Hungarian army and militia.

From the appearance of the first Soviet tanks on the outskirts of the city until the capture of Buda castle, 102 days passed. To serve as a contrast to this, Berlin fell in 2 weeks, Vienna 6 days and all the other major European capitals saw no fighting at all with the exception of Warsaw. Even the blockade of Leningrad, which lasted three years, saw no street fighting, and Stalingrad, which lasted for four months, had seen the majority of its civilian population evacuated before the fighting started.

In contrast, the 800,000 people of Budapest were caught up in the whirlwind and 38,000 died as a result of the fighting (the same number as German/Hungarian military personnel) and a further 76,000 were to die subsequently from starvation, execution, forced labour etc. The Red Army for their part were to lose some 80,000 dead and 1766 tanks and SP guns, just in the siege itself. This total does not include the fighting on the plains surrounding the city and losses from fighting off the relief attempts by the German army.

The Games

The games represent three key aspects of the fighting. The first concerns the initial onslaught by the Red Army on the suburbs of the city, the second the attempt to relieve the garrison and the third the break-out attempt by the survivors of the garrison. The three together can be played as a mini campaign, or as separate engagements and are all semi-fictional in nature, but give a feel for the type of fighting, although some the forces involved have been evened out a bit to give both sides a chance of winning.

Game I: North Csepel Airfield (December 1944)

The Axis forces were reliant on aid coming from the air and had set up several make-shift airfields around the city as the main ones had fallen already to the Red Army. One such airfield was the one set up at North Csepel, the large River Danube island to the south of the city. Here supplies were dropped by parachute and flown in by Ju 52 cargo planes and an even larger number of gliders.

Defending the area around the airfield was a 'kampfgruppe', hastily put together to stop the Soviet penetration from those units in the vicinity. The forces below represent what was available, and all are under strength to represent previous losses. Attacking them were elements of the 297th Rifle Division supported by tanks from the 2nd Mechanised Guards Corps.

The Objective

This is simple enough. The Soviets are to penetrate the Axis lines and break through the airfield perimeter fence with at least one tank and a company of infantry. The Axis forces must stop them. No time limit is on this game so as to represent the fighting being spread over more than one day. See the scenario map for starting positions and other information.

The Forces

All organisations are based on those given in the *Rapid Fire! 2nd Supplement: Organisations for the Russian Front 1941-45* unless otherwise stated.

AXIS

German

66th Panzer Grenadier Regiment (Major Schöning): Morale status 'Regular'.

This unit is under strength, so use the Panzer Grenadier unit of 2 x battalions on page 9 of the *Rapid Fire! 2nd Supplement* but remove one company from each battalion. The battalions have no transport other than 3 x Sdkfz 251's in the armoured battalion (for allocation as the local commander sees fit) and no SP heavy weapons.

Armour Support: Morale status 'Regular'.

The Regiment is supported by a company of 2 x Stug III's (long 75mm gun) and a single Panther, all of which are limited to a total movement of 30 inches each during the game to represent fuel shortages.

Artillery Support

Artillery is provided by an off-table battery of 2 x Nebelwerfers. These are controlled by an OP attached to the 66th's Regimental HQ.

Hungarian

17th University Assault Battalion: Morale status 'Poor'

This unit is one of the many militia units organised by the 'Arrow Cross' fascist party to help with the defence of the city. Use the 'Hungarian Infantry Battalion' table on page 34 of the *Rapid Fire! 2nd Supplement* minus all heavy weapons (except the 50mm mortar) and transport.

Special Axis conditions

All troops, AFVs, guns and support weapons can be dug in at the start of the game if so desired. In the built-up areas they may only be positioned on the edge of ruins or in factory yards.

Soviet

1st Regiment 297th Rifle Division: Morale status 'Average'

This unit is at full strength. Use the 'Soviet Rifle Regiment' table on page 55 of the *Rapid Fire! 2nd Supplement* with all additions, but keep as 'Regular'.

Tank Brigade

It is supported by a tank brigade. Use the 'Soviet Tank Brigade' table on page 63 of the *Rapid Fire! 2nd Supplement* with T34/76 tanks, no infantry and support weapons and 'Regular' status.

Artillery Regiment

Also in support is the divisional artillery regiment. Use the Soviet Rifle Division Artillery Regiment on page 69 of the *Rapid Fire! 2nd Supplement* with all additions except Guards status.

Air Support

A 'Shturmovik' ground attack aircraft (pre-planned attack) is available for a maximum of 5 turns over the table, but to demonstrate the confusion in the fighting, on attacking a target throw a D6 once. A score of 6 means it attacks the nearest friendly unit to the intended target!

Conclusion

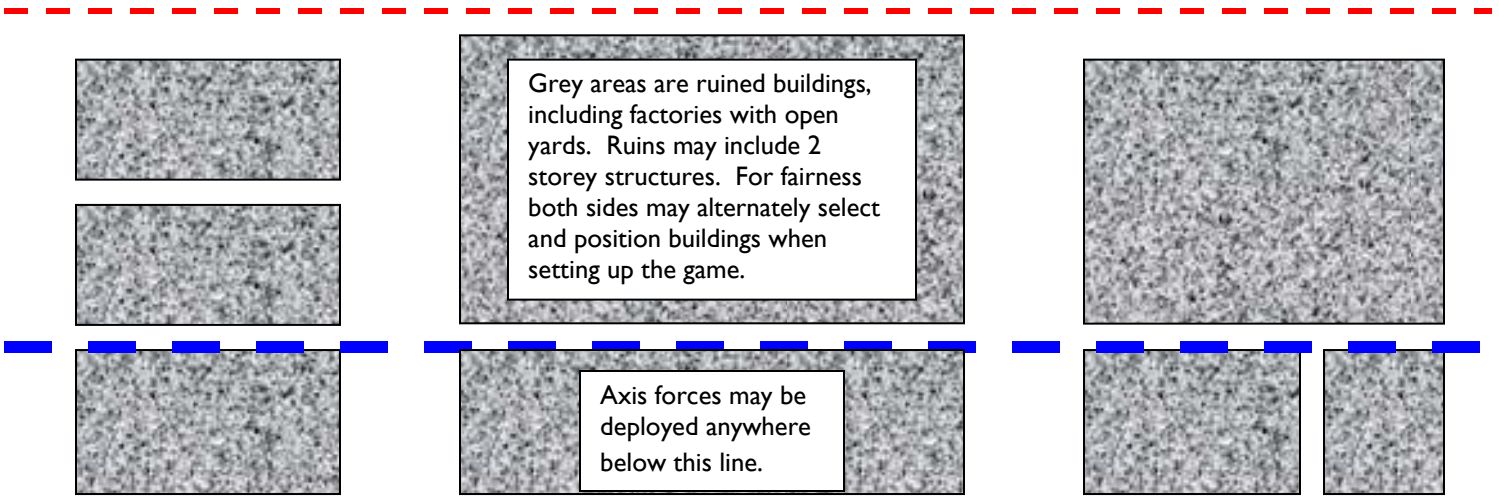
In reality this was a very bloody affair and the fighting in and around the whole area see-sawed back and forth for days, with counter attack after counter attack by both sides. Buildings changed hands many, many times, but eventually the area had to be evacuated by the beginning of January 1945 before the forces were cut off and surrounded.

In an area slightly to the North the 22nd Waffen SS 'Maria Theresa' Cavalry Division was virtually wiped out as it was caught withdrawing from its positions by Soviet armour. By the 18th January all effective resistance had ceased in Pest and the Soviets then concentrated on eliminating Buda from all sides.

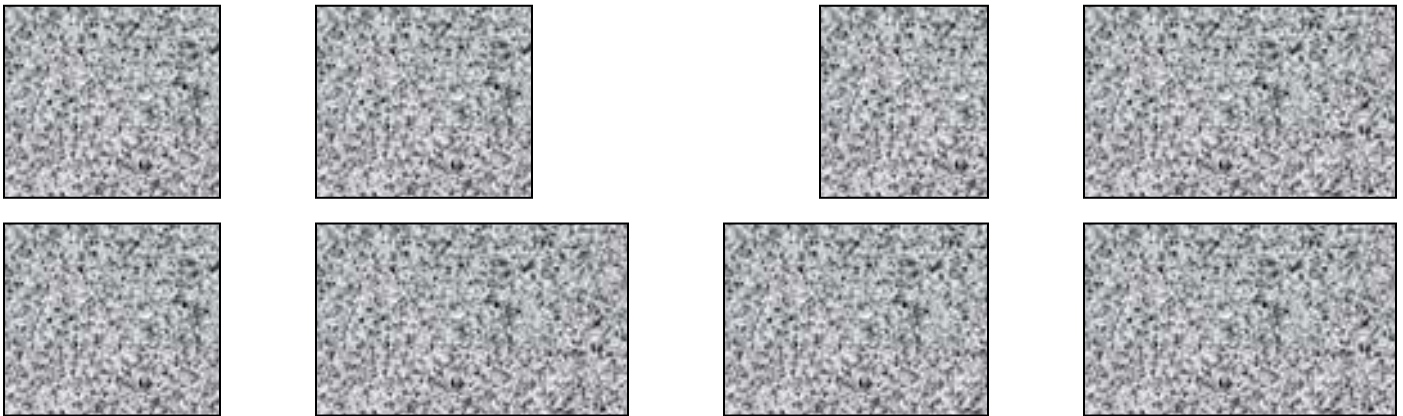
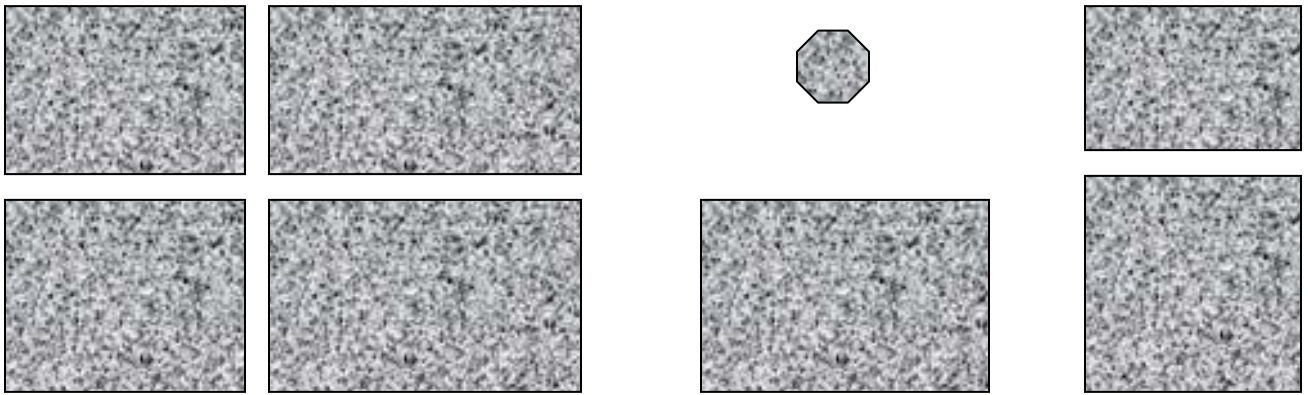
**North Csepel Island:
Battle for the airstrip**



Soviet start line



Roads are all passable but defender may position up to 6 barricades of up to 6 inches in length. Treat as anti-tank obstacles.



E-W roads are 6" wide, N-S are 4". Other narrower roads/paths are impassable to vehicles.

North Csepel Airfield perimeter fence. Fence gives soft cover. Up to 2 companies may dig in north of the fence.