

THE YEAR OF THE HORSE

Von Sternberg rides again



Historical Background

It is the late Summer of the Year of the Horse (1922). In a parallel universe version of Manchuria, the weather is bright, and the millet crops are high. The summer has been average with excellent growing conditions.

The province has been far from immune from the convulsions of two recent revolutions against the established order – the Chinese Revolution of 1911, ongoing, and the Russian Revolution and Civil War of 1917 – 20.

The Russian conflict saw the Reds get the upper hand in the West, and gradually extend their grip eastwards across Siberia, until they now control that whole region, right across to Vladivostok (though, in our own universe, that place was not captured until November).

In the course of that offensive, the Reds have displaced numerous White Russian bands southwards into the neighbouring territories of Mongolia and Manchuria. There, some of these White Russian adventurers have exploited their modern weaponry to carve out their own fiefs and press the locals, both the nomadic herdsmen of the steppe and the settled peasants of the plain, into military service.

One such adventurer, the Baikal Cossack Ataman Gregori Mikhailovich Semyenov, has assembled a Mongol 'Ordos' and christened it 'the Golden Horde of Urga'. The Ataman has personal command of the Purple Horde within the Golden horde. The Urga Horde has since brought under tribute all the Manchurian villages west of the Sha River, and conscripted their male inhabitants as poorly – armed infantry. The Horde's second in command, the monocle-wearing Baltic German General Baron Von Ungern – Sternberg, has personal command of the Blue Horde. Sternberg is tall, wild eyed, sadistic and said by friend and enemy alike to be quite mad. Now, a change of leadership in the Warlord territory to the East has tempted the Urga leadership into trying to grab some territory.

Geography & Communications

The action takes place on the Manchurian plain, a fertile millet-growing area sandwiched between the Mongolian steppe to the west and the coal-bearing Korean mountains to the east. The map scale is 5 miles to the inch. In the NE stands Putilov Hill, a famed battlesite from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/5. The SE corner features the Yentai coal mines, and the Hun river and the village of Huchiapu feature in the extreme NW corner of the map.

The Manchurian plain is bisected by the Sha River, by the Mandarin Road, and also by the Chinese Eastern Railway and its integral telegraph. Both the road and the railway run north to south through the middle of the plain. The river runs from SW to NE.

The Decauville railway consists of two branch lines, running off east and west respectively from the trunk CER line. [NB both these lines join up with the CER, either on or just off the map north of Suchiatun station]

There is a branch line of the CER running up to the Yentai coal mine. The CER carries all the Yentai coal north-eastwards over to Vladivostok for onward shipping to Japanese and other markets; these lines thereby account for a great deal not only of Imperial but also of Soviet Russian income – so much so that its rumoured that the Reds supplied the Great Leader with one of their old surplus armoured trains from their civil war, in order to guard the vital coal railway.

The plain, on both sides of the Sha River, is interspersed with villages of varying sizes. All of these are fortified with stockades, and in addition partially surrounded by fishponds, which will disrupt attacking troops (there has for centuries been a problem here with Mongol raiders from the steppe). The villages all house self defence militias, and in the case of Imperial militias, there will be a sprinkling of rifles to add to the usual agricultural implements employed as weapons.

Away from the villages, the plains are given over 10% to rice paddies, 10% to wheat, 20% to orchards, 20% to millet crops, and 40% to pasture for oxen, pigs, horses, sheep, and other beasts. At this season, the millet crop is up to 8' tall and ideal for concealment purposes. The rigid bamboo-like stalks require a machete to cut through, though the stalks also burn very easily. The millet may be harvested for forage, or made into an edible porridge, which is the peasants' staple diet in these parts.

A few of the villages contain religious pagodas which rise to a great height above the surrounding countryside, making excellent observation points. The pagodas are marked as pyramids on the map. The most notable pagoda is 'The Temple of Heaven', on Temple Hill on the eastern edge of the map, where the late Great Leader of the Celestial Empire habitually resided, and which enjoys a very fine view for miles over the plain. Half his concubines, and the Imperial army and governmental apparatus, still reside there.

Watercourses

– are at median height. There are no efficient engineer troops on either side, except on armoured train(s). Rivers cannot therefore be bridged (save where existing bridges are marked), but cavalry may swim their horses over still waters. Infantry, artillery and vehicles may find a ford, raft or boat to cross, but only after considerable delay (a very long delay in case of artillery and vehicles). Urga infantrymen have recently been observed by local fishermen constructing rafts on the banks of the Sha river, in all the settlements on the west bank of the river.

The water table on the plain is quite high, so that diggings tend quickly to fill with water.

Weaponry

For the purposes of the game, the maximum effective range of ranged small arms, including all MGs and rifles, is identical at about 1/10th inch on the map. Pistols and SMGs are of course close range weapons.

Mortars, rockets and the Osaka 75mm mountain gun (standard for the Imperial forces) fire effectively over ¼ inch (flat trajectory or direct fire), and to ½ inch for observed indirect fire.

The Russian M1902 field gun (standard for the Urga Horde) fires effectively over ½ inch (flat trajectory or direct fire), and one inch for observed indirect fire.

Armoured trains normally have an AA gun (and machine guns) to defend from aerial attack, plus M1902 field guns (both sides) on swivel mounts, engineer, telegraph, and commando units, and sometimes balloons and armoured cars.

THE GOLDEN HORDE OF URGA

The core of the Urga army is its skilled Mongol horsemen, fiercely loyal to their Khan/Warlord, the Renegade White Russian Baron Ungern-Sternberg, and his superior Ataman Semyenov. Their White Russian artillerymen, machine gunners, and infantry commandos are also loyal, and thoroughly competent with their equipment (though ammunition is not in vast supply).

Blue regiment one and Purple regiment one are White Russian commando squad(s) whose normal role is to crew or accompany armoured trains. The bulk of the Urga infantry is however of poor quality, consisting of reluctant Chinese conscripts from the villages of western Manchuria, often with insufficient rifles to go round.

SMALL ARMS OF THE GOLDEN HORDE

The German Gew 88 rifle (or Chinese copies of it made in Shanghai, Taiyuan and elsewhere) is common with the infantry, as is the short carbine version with the cavalry. There are also many Russian, and some Japanese Arisaka, small arms. There are some machine guns mounted on mobile carriages with each cavalry unit. Other than the commando train crews, the infantry have only a very few machine guns and mortars to support them.

ARTILLERY OF THE GOLDEN HORDE

Artillery is mostly Russian, and well served by White Russian mercenaries, of larger calibre than, but much inferior in numbers to, the Imperial guns. Maximum range is as above. The M1902 field gun is standard, cannot be disassembled for portage, but mounted on a highly mobile carriage which can keep up with cavalry. It has a high muzzle velocity, making it very easy to penetrate the armour on tanks or armoured cars. Resupply of shells is however inefficient away from the railheads, and in consequence guns must be used sparingly or risk running out of their scarce supplies of ammo.

Integral to each Urga conscript infantry unit there are some inaccurate and all-but-obsolete rocket launchers mounted on mobile carriages, and crewed by Chinese. Maximum range as above.

VEHICLES OF THE GOLDEN HORDE

Workshops are few on the steppe; the horse is preferred. There is one unit of homemade Russian armoured cars, and the Golden Horde is believed to operate an armoured train on the Western branch of the Decauville railway, named "The Great Wall of China", and bristling with guns, White Russian mercenaries, and all the usual accoutrements of armoured trains.

THE AIR FORCE OF THE GOLDEN HORDE

The White Russians are known to have operated a few planes in Siberia and Mongolia in the early twenties, though fuel was always a very big problem. It is not known whether any of these aircraft have found their way into the Golden Horde armies.

THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE OF THE RED DRAGON

The Great Leader of this warlord fief has just ascended to the heavens, leaving his son Zhan Zhaolin, also known as the Dear Leader, to rule in his place. The Dear Leader commands his Red Dragon Division personally in the field, but is nevertheless fond of wearing yellow silk robes and tall mandarin hats, and also of Suzy Wong, his floozy, chief of police and head spy all combined into one. Suzy is of uncertain sexuality, likes to wear red silk next to her skin, and bears the honorific title of Chief Dragon of the Empire. She is rumoured to dispose of a torture chamber somewhere deep in the coal mines.

Zhan Zhaolin's subordinate General is U Kow Tow, who has the Green Lotus Division under his personal command.

The Imperial army has profited from the proceeds of the coal mine, and is effectively armed to the teeth with modern weaponry, bought cheaply secondhand from the participants in the recent world war, and the preceding Manchurian war of 1904-5. Their cavalry is however much inferior both in numbers, quality and horsemanship.

SMALL ARMS OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE

The German Gew 88 rifle (or Chinese copies of it) is common with the infantry, as is the short carbine version with the cavalry. Austrian, Italian and many Japanese Arisaka small arms are also employed.

There is a sprinkling of grenades and of submachine guns, principally the Bergmann and the Thompson varieties. These are used principally by the 'do or die' suicide commando unit(s), presently operating from the Imperial armoured train. These are trained to operate in similar fashion to 1918 German stormtroopers, except that they also carry huge 'Dao' executioners swords, and are proficient in their use.

ARTILLERY OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE

The Imperial artillery is more numerous, but of smaller calibre, than that of the enemy; mountain guns are the usual form, especially the Japanese 75mm Osaka gun, a copy of a Krupp original. These are horse drawn but can be readily manhandled or even disassembled and carried on muleback, etc.

Maximum range is as above. Resupply of shells is inefficient, and in consequence guns must be used sparingly or risk running out of their scarce supplies of ammo.

Integral to the infantry units are numbers of 75mm Stokes trench mortars which have been purchased (from the colourful one-armed English salesman/adventurer Frank Sutton), for which ammo is present in slightly larger amounts.

AIR FORCE OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE

The Great Leader bought a number of aircraft for prestige reasons, but unfortunately few spare parts, with the result that all of them are believed to be grounded. There is however said to be one balloon in

useable shape, presently to be found aboard the armoured train. The Imperial forces possess one or more Italian rapid firing single shot AA guns, mounted on towable trailers, which in the past have defended Army HQ at Temple Hill.

ARMOURED VEHICLES OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE

There are known to be one or more small units of armoured cars, including the Citroen Kegresse half track; one or more small units of light Renault FT17 tanks, carrying only machine guns, and one or more small units of heavy Schneider Chars, which latter carry a 6 pdr forward firing gun plus several machine guns. Spare parts are hard to find, however, so many machines are believed to be out of commission much of the time. Fuel is also a major problem where these gas guzzlers are concerned (it has to be imported from the Dutch East Indies through the ports of the Liaoning peninsula). The heavy tanks are said to be kept normally on security duties around the coal mine, with flat railtrucks ready to transport them to the scene of any clash.

The previous Great Leader is believed to have possessed one armoured train, supplied by the Soviets to guard the coal line, vital to both parties. The Great Leader is rumoured to have kept on this train his prize chestnut grey charger, his yellow limousine, his grand piano, a hookah for smoking opium, a solid gold Mah Jongg set, and half of his concubines, in addition to his observation balloon, a rapid fire single shot AA gun, numbers of machine-guns and M1902s on swivel mounts, plus a Do or Die commando unit.

THE IMPERIAL DEFENCE PLAN

It is generally known that, due to shortage of troop numbers (there are many tied down in the mountains against Korean bandits, and in the south against other warlords), it is settled Imperial strategy not to line the western stretches of the Sha River with troops, but instead to defend at some distance BEHIND the river line in this sector.

Accordingly, though the settlements along the eastern banks of the Sha all have garrisons of infantry regulars – believed to be of the Green Division - these Imperial garrisons do not extend further than the western edge of the map, and beyond the riverline garrisons the river line can be crossed at leisure and with relative impunity.