

Observations after 344 games

timminventor_TS
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I confess to being a bit obsessed with Twilight Struggle. Since learning about the game in August 2010, and with the help of Bruce Wigdor's programming genius in Wargameroom.com, I've had the opportunity to play enough games to have answered some of the questions that I initially was curious to find answers to. Listed below are some of those answers. Note that I nearly always play the latest version and with optional cards.

Question 1: Given the use of the Optional Cards and no other balancing influence points for the US, how balanced is the game between the US and USSR?

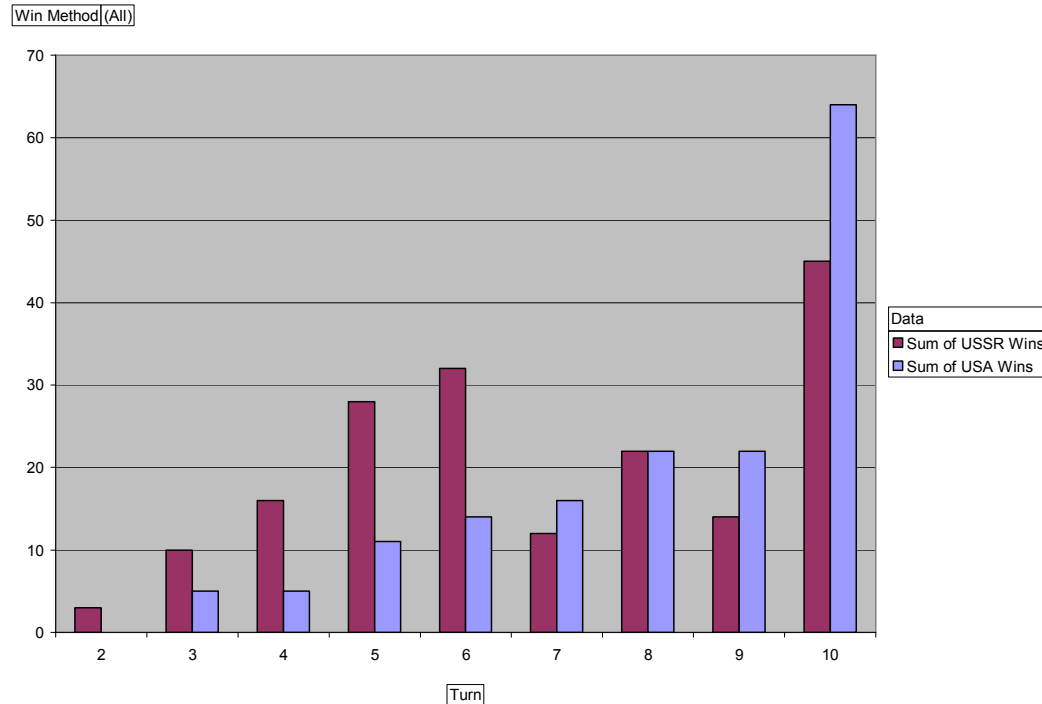
Count of Result	Result			
Played as:	Lost	Won	Grand Total	
USA	89	85	174	49%
USSR	74	93	167	56%
Grand Total	163	178	341	

3 games were draws.

My experience is that I win as USSR 56% of the time and 49% as the US. This is a total of all play and includes a wide range of games against opponents with varying skill and experience levels. Based on the two tournaments I've participated in, it appears that the USSR has much more of an advantage than represented above. At WAM IX, for instance, an experience player told me that: "The Game is played at +3". This seems to be the balance point which puts the US on an even footing with the USSR assuming experienced players. Note that this appears to be the case regardless of which edition is being used or whether or not the optional cards are in play. This is a very different experience than my stats would indicate since, for the most part, my stats represent no initial balancing influence for the US. I attribute the difference to be the level of play. On-line opponents are a mixture of experience and skill levels, whereas participants in TS tournaments are nearly always well-seasoned.

My conclusion in playing and observing games during tournaments is that highly experienced players are much more likely than new players to be able to maximize the early USSR advantage. Management of Defcon levels, scoring timing, and optimal use of Decolonization/De-Stalinization come with experience.

Question 2: It seems as though the USSR has an advantage until about half way through the game. If the US can just hold on long enough, the advantage will shift. Assuming this is true, why, and how imbalanced is this?



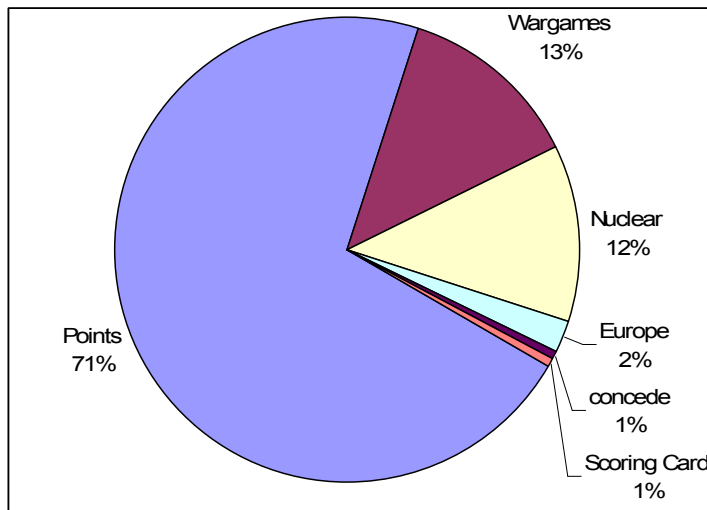
The chart shown indicates the side that won and the turn in which the game ended regardless of whether I won or lost. If the game ends on or before turn 6, it's likely that the USSR has won. The US is only slightly favored to be the winner in games ending in turns 7-9 and noticeably favored to win when the game lasts until turn 10.

I've observed the following reasons that the USSR is heavily favored in the first half of the game:

1. USSR has access better access to northern Asia through map layout and instant positioning in Asia and elsewhere through Decolonization, De-Stalinization De Gaulle and Vietnam Revolts.
2. The USSR starts with the China Card.
3. The USSR has 2 initial coups, i.e., Defcon 5 to 4 and 3 to 2 vs. the US single coup.
4. The US has bigger numbers of influence points associated with early war cards than does the USSR (37 vs. 33), but the USSR cards in Early War are both more powerful and have a more immediate impact. Compare Socialist Governments with East European Unrest, for instance. Both allow reductions of 3 influence points, but Socialist Governments allows for up to 2 points per country. Nasser, being only a single influence point, immediately allows control of a battleground country and cuts off the US from Libya whereas NATO (4) only becomes important later in the game when Special Relationship has a chance to be played after NATO is in effect.

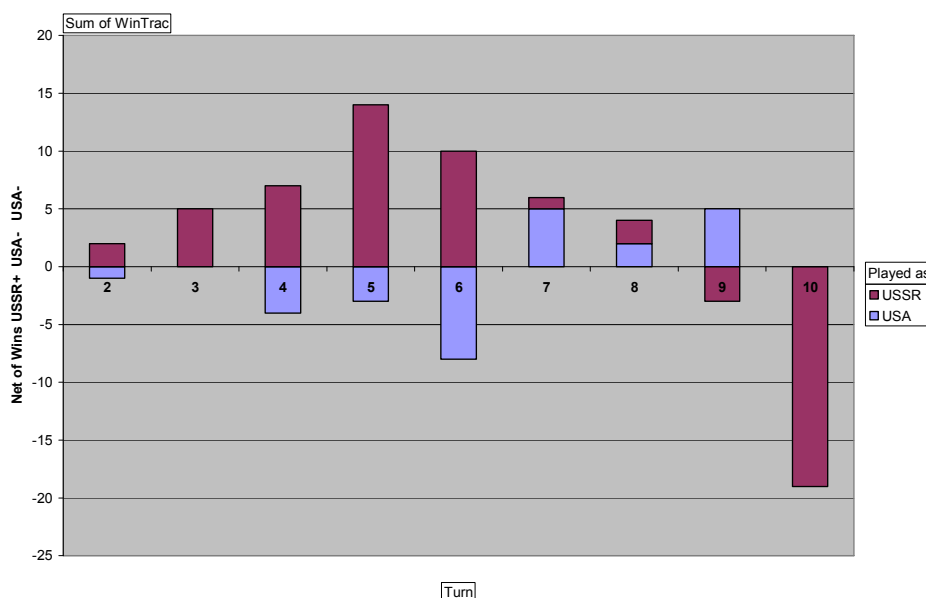
5. Scoring cards for Africa, South America and Central America are likely to be played before turn 7, during which time the US has not had as many opportunities as the USSR has had to enter these regions. Decolonization, for instance, is available in Early War, whereas the US must wait until Mid War for Colonial Rearguard to become available.

Question 3: The game can end in several different ways. What is the distribution of different types of ending?



Wargame endings were a fairly even mix between “Would have won anyway”, “Very Close” and “Merciful Ending”. Also note that, essentially, Wargames is a Points type win.

Question 4: How do I do personally at various stages of the game?



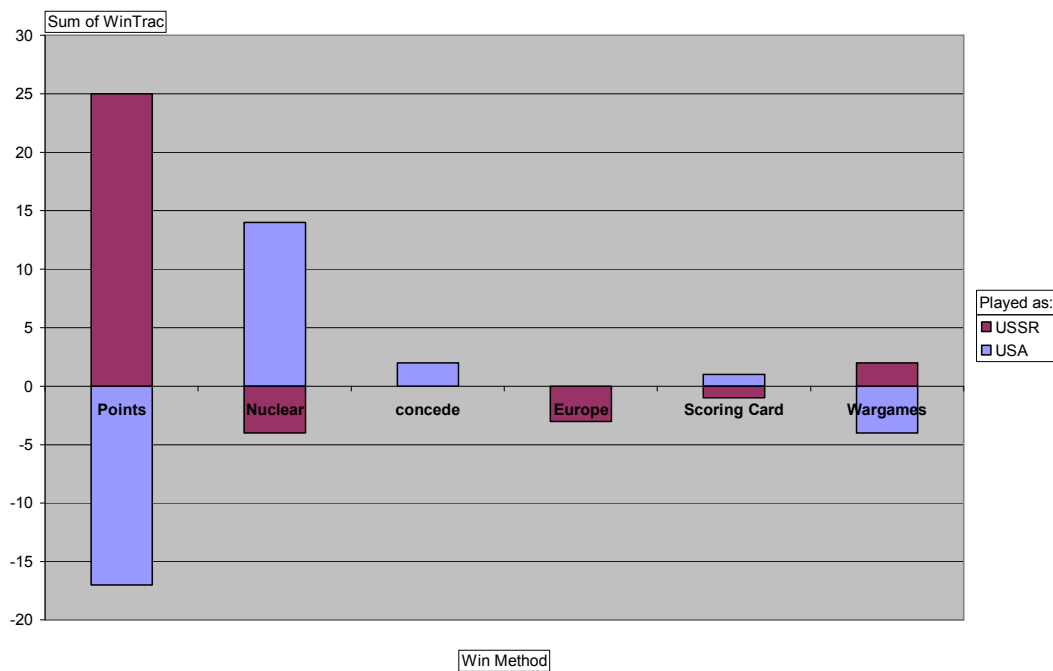
This chart indicates my net wins and losses at various turns. In games ending on turns 3, 5, 7 and 8, I win significantly more often than losing. I have 14 more wins than losses as USSR in turn 5, for instance. Since the USSR is favored to win when the game ends on turn 5, it's not surprising to have net wins. Note, however, that the reverse is not true when I'm playing US. In evenly matched games, the US should have net negative losses to mirror the positive USSR net wins. What puzzled me for some time is why I do significantly better in early and mid war than I do when the game lasts until turn 10. Note that my net wins vs. losses as US in games ending in turn 10 are even, even though the US is favored to win on turn 10; whereas, I lose far more often than win as USSR.

I believe the answer is that playing with less experienced players will likely end in earlier turns so my poor showing in turn 10 largely represents my stats for play against skilled opponents.

Question 5: What are the various types of Nuclear Endings and which side is favored to win?

Notes	Total
CIA	6
Grain Sales	5
Five Year Plan + CIA	4
We Will Bury You+Missile	4
Duck+CIA	2
KAL007	2
lone gunman	2
Tear Down this Wall	2
We Will Bury You	2
Ames and Lone	1
CIA+Aldridge Ames	1
Five Year+Duck and Cover	1
Five Yr Plan-KAL007	1
Grain Sales+Duck	1
KAL007+Duck	1
Missile Envy-KAL007	1
Purge+Tear Down this Wall	1
Star Wars	1
Summit	1
Terrorism+Aldrich+Lone	1
Terrorism+Lone	1
Ortega	1

The table shown above indicates the cards and card combinations causing a Nuclear Ending and their associated frequency. Note that some of the '+' combinations represent endings during the headline phase.



The chart shown above indicates that the US is much more likely to be the winner on Nuclear Endings.

A big part of the nuclear imbalance is likely to be that there are simply more US cards associated with Nuclear endings than there are USSR:

- 7 Nuclear Cards, US: CIA, Grain Sales, Five Year Plan, Duck and Cover, Tear Down this Wall, KAL007, Star Wars
- 4 Nuclear Cards, USSR: We Will Bury You, Lone Gunman, Ortega, Ames, (Iran Hostage)

A second reason probably is that the US more often holds the China card, allowing for greater flexibility in holding a dangerous card from turn to turn. A third reason is that the US events typically come before the USSR events during the headline phase.

Expect an update when I reach 500 games!

Tim