

1989: Dawn of Freedom

2 players, 120-150 minutes

Designed by Ted Torgerson and Jason Matthews

Published by **GMT Games**

Reviewed by **Simon Weinberg**

1989: Dawn of Freedom is one of a plethora of new games published by the impressively dynamic GMT Games, whose successes have included Paths of Glory, Dominant Species, Command & Colors, Urban Sprawl, and of course Twilight Struggle, which currently holds the number 1 spot on BGG. In fact GMT have 4 games in the top 25...pretty impressive.

1989 can be looked upon as the sequel to Twilight Struggle and shares many of that game's ideas and systems as well as one of the authors, Jason Matthews. Jason Mathews has of course co-authored other 2 player games of this ilk, in which history is replayed by two sides with differing goals in mind: 'Campaign Manager 2008' and '1960: The Making of the President' are both successful games dealing with the Obama/McCain and JFK/Nixon elections respectively. There are similarities and differences in all these games, not least of all in duration and complexity, and 1989 appears to sit at about the same complexity level as TS while playing a little bit faster. Here, since I don't own Twilight Struggle, I will offer a standalone review of 1989 (my apologies to those of you who own Twilight Struggle but I believe you will be able to judge for yourself whether you would like to add 1989 to your collection).

1989: Dawn of Freedom comes in a commendably compact and densely-packed box, most of which is weighed down by an extensive – almost daunting – instruction book (which turns out to be mostly taken up by a complete play-through of a single round, plus a detailed explanation of the events behind the special event cards which make up part of the game); and a large, satisfyingly thick board depicting the old Eastern Bloc

countries – Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.

These countries contain a number of spaces that will be fought over, each of which represent either different political arenas (the government power elite, the bureaucrats) or socio-political arenas (the intellectuals, religious leaders, students, minority leaders, and workers). Each space is associated to a major town in the country but this is purely for flavour; and in addition some spaces are designated ‘battlegrounds’, these areas being essential for decent Victory Point scoring as detailed later. The spaces each have 2 boxes for playing influence counters into, one for each side, and in simplistic terms the game consists in playing strategy cards to influence the different spaces in each of the countries. Most countries start the game off as predominantly Communist, representing the situation in early 1989; the Communist player must strive to hold on to as many areas as possible to win the game whereas the Democrat player will attempt to win influence in critical areas in order to win so-called power struggles triggered at various points in the game. To get control of critical spaces, players may play their cards for Operation Points, and with these operation points they may buy influence increases in a given box. If by doing so their influence becomes greater than the influence of the controlling player by an amount specified on the box which is called the stability number, then the active player takes over control of that area. So for example, if the Communist has 4 influence in Warsaw, which has a stability value of 3, the Democrat would have to have 7 influence or more to control Warsaw.

The game takes place over a maximum of 10 rounds (which the rules call “turns”), during each of which the players start with 8 cards and will play 7 of them. The Strategy deck of 110 cards is deliberately staggered into three parts, representing the early, middle and late events of 1989, and each strategy card shows an “Operations” number and the description of an event. Cards can be Communist, Democrat or neutral cards but all are shuffled into the same deck and drawn by both players. In a game round, players take turns to play one card as an Operations or Event card; the difficulty being that if a card is played as an Operations card, and the

card is one associated with the opponent, the Event takes place anyway. Nasty. The only way to avoid an opponent's Event being played out, besides keeping that card in your hand since you only play 7 or your 8 cards, is to make a "Tiananmen Square Attempt" which can be done once per round only and will be explained below.

Playing a card as an Operations Card

Each Strategy card shows a number of Operations points ranging from 1–4. These points can be used to add Support Points (influence) to one or several spaces on the board, with the proviso that new Support Points (SPs) can only be added in spaces which already have your SPs or which are adjacent to spaces already containing your SPs – the board is seeded with SPs from both sides at the beginning of the game. Adding SPs to a space controlled by the opponent costs two Ops points, and to other spaces costs one point.

As an alternative to simply adding SPs, players can instead use a card to make two Support checks in two areas. A Support check is done simply by picking a space to check and rolling a die, adding the Ops value of your card to the result. Any Adjacent spaces you control add a further 1 point to the total, but adjacent opponent-controlled spaces subtract a point. The support check will be successful if the total of this sum exceeds double the stability value indicated on the space (mentioned earlier). If successful, then the opponent must remove Support from this area equal to the amount your sum exceeded this double. So if the Stability value is 3 and you roll a 6 then he must remove 3 SPs.

The third and final way to use your strategy card, as mentioned earlier, is the "Tiananmen Square Attempt" which is allowed once per round only. The board shows a double track indicating different targets for each side; when making an attempt the player rolls a die and adds the Ops value and any appropriate modifiers to the result: if the resulting sum meets or exceeds the target indicated on the board then the attempt is successful. Apart from avoiding an Event, a successful attempt brings some bonuses, many of which are permanent and helpful to the game.

Playing a card as an Event

The 110 Strategy cards show a plethora of Events linked to the happenings of 1989, all of which are explained in fascinating detail in the rules booklet. The theme is one of the major attractions of this game, and the authors have picked out and put together in great detail 110 of the steps taken towards, and away from, the end of the communism. Some example cards:

“Yakovlev counsels Gorbachev’ (Democrat Event): Place in front of the Democratic Player. The Democrat receives a +1 modifier to the Support Loss and Victory Point die rolls if he wins the next Power Struggle. Then remove this card from the game” – according to the explanation in the rulebook, this card refers to Gorbachev advisor Alexander Yakovlev, who was an early ally of Gorbachev’s also advocating for democracy, the two men discovering each other’s common disenchantment with the current situation as early as 1983.

“Kohl Proposes Reunification (Democrat Event)’: +2 Victory Points: The Democratic Player may place Support Points or make Support Checks using the Ops value of this card if “*The Wall Must Go!*” has been played as an Event successfully” – this card refers to Nov 21st 1989 when Gorbachev sent Chancellor Kohl a hastily written note saying that the Soviets were prepared to consider all options for the future, including even a United Germany if it was without nuclear weapons. As a result Kohl took the initiative and proposed a plan for reunification to the German Government a week later.

These are just two examples of the thematic nature of the game – and while many of us remember some of the events of 1989, the cards certainly make this a more interesting and thematic game which can only add to the enjoyment of both players.

If a player plays a Strategy card for Operations, and the card’s Event is associated with the opponents side, the Event on the card must be triggered either before or after he makes his move, the choice being his. If however the Event is associated with his side (i.e. it’s a Democratic card if he is playing the Democrat side) he must choose to play the card’s

event instead of using the card as an Ops card if he wants the Event to occur. When he does this, the Event is carried out according to the instructions. Events may be temporary or permanent and will impact Support points in areas, dice rolls, and so on. Most of the cards favour the Democratic side, which is normal (and unlike Twilight Struggle) since the game starts with the Communist party in power.

Power Struggle & Scoring

The 6 countries featured in the game are each subject to scoring during the game. Scoring cards for two countries are shuffled into each of the three staggered decks, and if a player receives a scoring card in his draw he is obliged to play it as one of his 7 turns, although again the timing of when to play it is up to him.

When the scoring card is eventually played, the country identified is immediately subjected to a “Power struggle” followed by a scoring; which is either successful (Democracy prevails over communism and the country is liberated) in which case the scoring card is removed from the game; or unsuccessful in which case it is discarded and shuffled into the deck later.

Power struggle resolution begins with each player drawing cards from the Power Struggle deck. This is a totally separate deck of cards with four suits: ‘March’, ‘Strike’, ‘Petition’ and ‘Rally in the Square’. There are 2 other types of cards in the deck, which are Leaders and Wild cards. Players draw cards according to the control they have in the country being scored: 6 cards if they control any spaces, and 2 bonus cards per additional space held.

The Power Struggle begins with the initiating player playing a card of a given suit. The opponent must match the suit of the card played, the value of which is irrelevant. If he cannot, the power struggle is lost. If he can, there is then a battle for initiative. The opponent rolls a dice and must roll a number greater than that shown on the initiator’s played card. If he does, then he immediately wins the initiative and gets to choose the next suit played.

Leader cards play like joker cards, but can only be used if the player controls the appropriate space, eg the Students or the Workers, in the country being scored. Wild cards can also be played on any suit, and have nasty effects such as preventing the use of one suit, or making the opponent discard cards.

The Power Struggle will end when a player cannot match the suit of the card played by his opponent. The results of the struggle are different depending on whether the Communist or the Democrat wins. In both cases the victor receives modest Victory Points awarded on the basis of a die roll, while the defeated side will take a hit on their influence points, also decided by a die roll. But if he is victorious, the Communist receives a bonus for resisting successfully, this bonus going up each time a power struggle in the region is attempted. In addition, both players score more VPs according to the number and type of areas they control in the country. These VPs vary according to the country, and are awarded based on the number of spaces controlled by the player, with bonuses for the identified "battleground" areas: to score maximum VPs you must control all battlegrounds in the country being scored. In all cases VPs are scored on a single track on the board ranging from -20 (Communist Victory) to + 20 (Democrat Victory).

1989: Dawn of Freedom ends under one of three conditions:

- The VP marker reaches -20 or +20 VPs.
- The card "New Year's Eve Party" - appearing in the third of the staggered Strategy card decks - is played as an Event, and as a result the Communist player decides to End the Game (this card allows a bonus if the Communists still control 4 or more countries, and allows the Democrat to score 1 country where the Communist still holds power at the end of the round)
- The game reaches round 10 - in which case a final scoring takes place which consists only in the Communists being awarded additional VPs for each country they still hold in power.

1989 is an excellent, tense and highly thematic game, and the to and fro tussle for power across the different political theatres of Eastern Europe and the Balkans makes the time spent playing simply fly by. Players will benefit from knowing the cards they are dealt and thus an inexperienced player should start by playing the Democrat, who has more favourable Events and will be less daunted than if he was to play the Communist, with the tide of Democracy continuously pummeling him!

The board, components and cards are of excellent quality and clearly a lot of effort has gone into the game in terms of research and artwork.

For me the game is like a sequel to Twilight Struggle: some elements have been changed, and the feel of the game will be very different in that it is an unequal struggle between the two sides, with the Communist just trying to hold onto power with every means at his disposal. The Power Struggle sequence adds a lot of tension and fun to the game and is very cleverly implemented. Sequels of successful games, like Power Grid, Ticket to Ride or Memoir '44 have proven to be attractive propositions for fans when they bring something new to the table, and as a result I have no doubt that 1989 will do well. For players new to Twilight Struggle, the decision of which game to buy will depend vary much on your feeling for the theme and on the availability and price of the games, noting that Twilight Struggle is currently out of print, but in any case I can strongly recommend 1989: Dawn of Freedom.