

DURING World War II, the operational level of war was recognized as having great importance and utility for US combat units. It was at the operational level that the theater commander communicated his views concerning the employment of military resources at his disposal. It was essential the theater commander plan for the use of these resources over periods of several weeks and even months.

After the war ended, the importance of the operational level was lost as service schools began to teach only tactics and strategy. Perhaps this decreased emphasis was understandable considering the pressure at the end of World War II to demobilize forces (a task accomplished with great success) and the subsequent Cold War. The United States simply did not have a large standing army or the forces prepared to execute extended campaigns. Also the strategic thinking was that an army was obsolete with the power of the atomic bomb and the long-range bomber. Any war would obviously be short in view of massive retaliation.

The conflicts in Korea and Vietnam did little to change this thinking. These were essentially conflicts at the tactical level and did not necessitate the orchestration of large units. The operational level of war was still overlooked.

However, since 1976 the US Army has recognized there is a need to weave a strategic fabric from the individual tactical strands of combat, and this coordination must take place within the theater of operations. Leaders have become convinced there is a great possibility for limited, conventional war. There is a need for a standing force prepared to fight small incursions and large-scale, protracted conflicts. With the 1982 version of US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, there has been a rebirth of interest in the operational level of war.

The operational level of war is best char-

acterized as the overall orchestration and control of various components or tactics used to achieve some strategic goals. It is often defined as large-unit operations. It translates the strategic goals of the nation

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(generally the province of the political leaders) into a series of steps to be executed by tactical combat units (generally corps and below). Like the music produced by the many pieces of an orchestra is harmonious sound, the operational level orchestrates the actions of a number of subordinates toward a common goal. In this case the theater commander is analogous to the orchestra conductor.

The theater commander must visualize his operations from beginning to end and base his plan on specific means of defeating his enemy. According to (draft) FM 100-15, *Corps Operations*, this may include making the enemy's position in the theater untenable by destroying his logistic support, defeating his allies or separating him from them, occupying facilities and terrain critical to the enemy, separating his forces, attacking his homeland, destroying the will of his nation to continue resistance, destroying his fighting forces or any combination of these.

FM 100-5 defines "operational art" as the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations through design, organization

and conduct of campaigns and major operations. It is implemented by defining a series of joint actions designed to attain a strategic objective in the theater of war. The operational level demands that fundamental decisions about when and where to fight and whether to accept or decline battle be made.

The effective operational commander must see the enemy's current courses of action, as well as future dispositions and options available to both sides. The operational level must be sufficiently robust so that minor tactical setbacks do not disrupt the flow of the plan and its potential to accomplish the theater goals.

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Perhaps most important to the operational level of war is a vision provided by the commander of the resulting conditions he expects to obtain when the operation is over. He has to define what military condition must be produced in the theater to achieve the strategic goal, what sequence of actions is most likely to achieve that goal and how resources should be applied, in what priority, to follow the planned sequence.

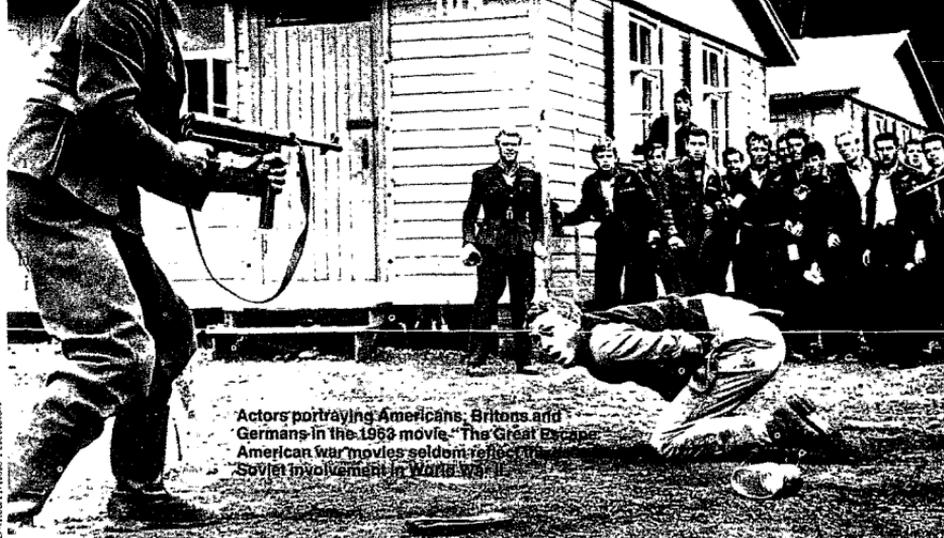
The operational level of war is made operational in a campaign plan, defined by Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Publication 1, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, as a "plan for a series of related military operations aimed to accomplish a common objective, normally within a given time and space." Likewise, FM 100-5 states that a campaign, the representative of the operational level of war, consists of

"sustained operations designed to defeat an enemy force in a specified space and time with simultaneous and sequential battles." JCS Publication 2, *Unified Action Armed Forces*, states that for major commands the operational level of war must "express the commander's decision in terms of specific operations projected as far into the future as practicable . . . an orderly schedule of the strategic decisions made by the commander to allow sufficient time to procure and provide the means to secure desired or assigned objectives."

Thus, the operational level of war takes the strategic aims of the nation and expresses the means to attain them. It includes orchestration of timing, resources, priorities, forces, and the needs and goals of the command. The operational level focuses the activities of a number of subcommands and ensures needed resources arrive in the area of operations according to an established schedule that supports the efforts of each subcommand.

The essence of the operational level is the ability of the commander to visualize and foresee operations effectively. This is the *coup d'oeil* mentioned by Carl von Clausewitz and Henri Jomini—the inner eye of vision to literally see the future and to take action to make the vision happen. The operational level does not necessarily reflect the entire war, but may only address the time needed to achieve intermediate theater objectives. Winning the entire war may require several campaigns.

Also recognize that a large theater of war may be divided into several smaller theaters of operations because of size or diversity of geography and people. Each of these levels has an operational commander, and often the synchronization of these campaign plans becomes a center of gravity for the friendly (and enemy) forces. Thus, the effective operational commander is sufficiently flexible to allow adjustment during execu-



Actors portraying Americans, Britons and Germans in the 1963 movie "The Great Escape." American war movies seldom reflect the Soviet involvement in World War II.

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tion based on the exigencies of the conflict situation and keeps his orders simple to overcome the potential friction inevitable in any conflict.

The operational commander must threaten the enemy in several areas simultaneously. He retains the initiative and seeks an opportunity to attack enemy weaknesses as they become apparent. The operational art positions forces to create operational advantages over the enemy before contact is ever made. As Sun Tzu indicated, proper preparation will allow victory before the battle is even joined. The effective operational commander must see the enemy's current courses of action, as well as future dispositions and options available to both sides. The operational level must be sufficiently robust so that minor tactical setbacks do not disrupt the flow of the plan and its potential to

accomplish the theater goals.

The effective operational-level commander plans attacks throughout the theater with all means available to constantly pressure his adversary. He considers all ways and means to exploit success by seeing the future battlefield, anticipating it and timing the application of his forces to the greatest advantage.

Using these definitions, a comparison of two nations' styles of war at the operational level is instructive. An examination of the Soviets and the Germans during World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, follows. Leadership styles, firepower, maneuver, intelligence, protection of forces, sustainment, deception and disruption are considered. Thoughts on the implications of these styles of war for future combat are also presented.



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The Soviets

Historical accounts of traumatic events are bound to include nationalistic sentiment. For this reason, US accounts of World War II seldom portray the tremendous influence the Soviet Union had on the conduct of the war and the ultimate defeat of Germany. This is understandable in light of post-war tensions and the Cold War of the 1950s. An entire generation of Americans grew up believing the war was won on the Western Front, and the Eastern Front was merely an unimportant side show that tied up German forces. Apparently, the true heroics and the ultimate victory were gained by the Anglo-American forces on the African and European continents.

Similarly, generations of Soviets view the participation of non-Soviet forces in World War II as unimportant. Just as we view the Soviets with a profound distrust, we are viewed. Thus, histories of either country's

contribution to World War II and its techniques of fighting are skewed by political intrigues.

To overcome this problem, in late 1947 and 1948, a committee of former German officers at the European Command (EUCOM) Historical Division Interrogation Enclosure # in Neustadt, Germany, undertook a careful and objective examination of Soviet combat methods used during World War II. Who better to ask than those who fought against the Soviet operational art?

During the early period of the war, the Soviet techniques of combat could be characterized as totally lacking in any flexibility. The Soviet fighter did not possess the judgment to think independently. After invasion by Germany, it became the full intention of the Soviet High Command to protect the homeland and stop the German forces. This they did by a peculiar disregard for human beings and a contempt for life in general.

During World War I, the Russian army had been an amorphous mass, immovable and lacking in any individuality. It held a tremendous number of illiterates. After the revolution, Soviet forces were well on their way to acquiring a strong sense of individuality. This sense of independence was not fully achieved during World War II, but it was not far off, if still elusive.

The Soviets demanded and received from their soldiers a bravery and unqualified obedience unmatched in any other World War II army. They took a raw mass of men and, in the later days of the war, converted them into an extremely effective fighting machine. The severity of the average Soviet peasant's life injured him to the privations of war, and the Soviet soldier seemed unaffected by the demands of terrain and season. Since he required few provisions and most of the Great Patriotic War was fought in "Mother Russia," sustainment problems dealt only with equipment and supplies for the conduct of operations, not for the care and provisioning of the individual soldier.

In the area of deception, the Soviets seldom employed large-scale ruses. While they did feign the existence of troops by increasing the level of fire supposedly being offered by those troops, this became commonplace and, hence, predictable. On the other hand, the Germans reported they had to constantly be on guard against dishonesty and deception attempts by individual Soviet soldiers. They would feign surrender and suddenly open fire at very close range or feign death to accomplish a sudden ambush of the unsuspecting.

At the higher echelons of command, the Soviet leaders proved very capable from the onset of the war. They demonstrated a great deal of flexibility, initiative and energy, but were unable to inspire the mass of Soviet soldiers. The various political purges in the Soviet Union took their toll of these officers and an appreciable portion of this command

strata simply disappeared. The young, energetic Soviet nation was able to draw upon its populace to replace these officers, but not until a certain decrease in the efficiency and effectiveness of the Soviet forces had occurred.

In mid-July 1941, the German LIII Infantry Corps was sent to the defensive battle in the Dnieper-Berezina triangle to dull Semen K. Timoshenko's thrust into the flank and rear of the 2d Panzer Group. The Soviets planned a double envelopment with Timoshenko commanding the southern pincer. Although the Germans had defeated the northern pincer, Timoshenko skillfully carried out his part of the operation, bottling up the 2d Panzer Group for three weeks with numerically inferior forces.

Apparently, German methods of conducting campaigns had a great influence on the Soviets. Having read J. F. C. Fuller as interpreted by B. H. Liddell-Hart, the Soviets emphasized operations against flank and rear, large-scale envelopments and encirclements. Likewise, they used mobile defense and, finally, breakthrough and breakout. All of these techniques can be seen in Timoshenko's plan for a double envelopment and isolation of the large German armored forces that had crossed the Dnieper. In execution, this operation was conducted in an efficient and energetic fashion. In November 1941, the Soviets correctly identified the weakest part of the German armored thrusts and carried out a large-scale operation to counter the Germans' forward momentum.

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Although the upper levels of the Soviet command had a great flexibility of thought and operation, such was not the case at lower levels (division and below). At these levels the Soviet army often remained inflexible and indecisive. The result was often lethargy and missed opportunities.

Soviet elements that had broken through German lines often remained for days without recognizing their favorable position or taking advantage of it. Often, commanders reacted according to tactical doctrine without regard for the current circumstances. In September 1941, Soviets attacked the same sector for seven straight days for no apparent reason, without any understandable rationale and with no apparent success, but with extremely high losses. The new commander had apparently found an old order stating that attacks should be mounted all along the front to ease the pressure on Leningrad. Unable to determine that these attacks had ever been made, he resolved to follow the order, though it was in fact more than two months old and the pressure on Leningrad had long since dissipated.

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In some ways the Soviets were themselves a contradiction. While the army or army group boundary was inviolable, they showed a remarkable flexibility in their frequent shifting of units in the front lines. Likewise, when units were "used up," they were withdrawn from combat to be refilled or totally replaced. They used their railroad system most effectively to rapidly concentrate forces on the battlefield and learned that speed was synonymous with survival.

Thus, according to P. H. Vigor, the cam-

paign in Manchuria became an excellent example of the way in which the Soviets are likely to start future wars. Specifically, they learned to concentrate overwhelming combat power against an enemy's vulnerability. They secured strategic surprise. They learned that their earlier inflexibility and repetitiveness had cost them dearly in terms of men and materiel. They even developed a deception plan which was not their mode of operation in earlier phases of war. The Soviets used the least expected route, date, time, place and weather conditions to mount their attack.

The next important area of Soviet operations in the later part of World War II involved the use of speed to overcome the enemy. Though the Japanese in the area were essentially weak, the creation of forward detachments, consisting of several divisions with their supporting arms, could themselves smash most enemy resistance and could remain in column formations. Finally, the Soviets had learned to bypass pockets of resistance. Like the Germans on the Eastern Front, the Soviets learned that the *Aufrollen* and *Schwerpunkt* of what *Time* magazine called "blitzkrieg" were very effective against any enemy, including themselves.

The Germans

Like the Soviets, the Germans recognized the art of war involved the correct estimation and careful weighing of one's own capabilities in light of enemy capabilities. Their commanders knew that to be successful against the Soviets, they had to employ all resources with correct timing in suitable terrain and in a way that was at least expected to guarantee success.

The long duration of World War II and the ever-widening scope of the war created a state of constant shortages and deficiencies. Unlike their Soviet opponents, the Germans immediately adopted a flexibility of mind that allowed improvisation as necessary.



Soviet infantry rush past a destroyed panzer.

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Unfortunately, toward the end of the Soviet Campaign the entire operation became one of improvisation. Time was of the essence.

On penetrating the western Soviet defenses, the Germans felt the pinch of vulnerable lines of communication. To protect these supply lines, they were forced to commit units to guard duty that could have been in combat. They also found that their intelligence was lacking. While they had initially been greeted as liberators, their high-handed treatment of the local populace had eliminated the best of their intelligence sources. Now, harassed by partisans and cavalry, the Germans felt the blindness of no intelligence data.

By February 1942, the Germans were severely exhausted. Though their leaders were strong and capable, limitations on resupply and replacements had cut down on their willingness to fight. Similarly, the army, so dependent on mechanized forces to

defeat the enemy, had bogged down in the Soviet mud.

Little known to many, this began the snail offensive. Here, speed was not of the essence. In fact, the speed of a snail was sufficient. Units would proceed only to a worthwhile objective without incurring a great deal of danger. This operation was to grope like a snail and withdraw its feelers or completely change direction when confronted by an obstacle. Its sole purpose was to place the supply lines beyond the enemy's reach. While this offensive was atypical of the German mode of operations, it serves to demonstrate the flexibility with which they approached operations on the Eastern Front—directly contrary to the inflexibility demonstrated by the enemy.

German flexibility extended to organization as well. At Seydlitz, General Walther Model lacked intelligence concerning his enemy to such an extent that he formed a

German supply movement on the Eastern Front depended heavily on horse-drawn transport throughout the war.



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provisional cavalry brigade from the reconnaissance battalions of the eight divisions under his command.

Though Adolph Hitler believed the Soviet Union could be overthrown in one campaign, his operational commanders did not. They focused on the Soviet army, believing that the loss of Moscow was something the Soviet High Command could not risk. Thus, a threat to Moscow would force the Soviets to meet them on the field where German operations—characterized by speed and flexibility to probe the enemy's weakness—could concentrate manpower and firepower.

Firepower was quickly brought to bear on the enemy by superior German mobility. Their forces, largely mechanized in the spearpoint of the blitzkrieg, could generally maneuver to threaten the Soviet lines of communication at several places simulta-

neously. Later, when the maneuverability of the Soviet forces rivaled that of the Germans, primarily because of the massive Soviet mechanization effort, this advantage was negated. The Soviets learned well from German examples and turned the Germans' own operational techniques against them. Then, the overwhelming numbers of forces the Soviets could mass at one point simply broke the strained supply lines of the Germans and forced defeat.

There are many similarities between the operational techniques of the Germans and the Soviets during the latter days of the war. The German *Kesselschlacht* actually involved a series of double envelopments which became the hallmark of Soviet operations in Manchuria and during the Belorussian offensive. Both armies successfully used infiltration techniques to put formid-

able forces in their opponent's rear areas. Both learned the importance of combined arms, particularly combining infantry and armor with field artillery and aerial cover during all operations.

Thus, on the Eastern Front victory was achieved by the forces that could use their intelligence systems to identify enemy weaknesses, protect their own forces while maneuvering against these weaknesses, achieve operational surprise through the use of deception plans, bring decisive masses of forces and firepower to bear against the enemy, and sustain that force through the long winters. To make this happen, the leadership had to orchestrate all efforts to achieve theater and strategic goals, while demonstrating adequate flexibility to modify plans as necessary to take advantage of the situation.

The Future

This discussion bears important information for future combat. The Soviets have demonstrated a success in combat that cannot be taken lightly. Their World War II enemies, the Germans, a highly respectable

army by any standards, did not overlook Soviet skills. I believe that today we dangerously delude ourselves concerning these skills.

At the lowest level, we believe that the Soviet soldier is a Vodka-dependent incompetent, who blindly follows orders without question. While that may have been an accurate description at one time, it is not accurate now. The Germans credited the Soviet soldier with being one of the bravest they had ever faced, including Americans and British. Likewise, he is inured to a hardship well beyond that of the US fighting man. He follows doctrine, but not dogma.

At the operational level, the inflexibility of thinking that characterized the Soviet High Command in the early days of the war is gone. As seen in the Manchuria operation, the Soviets learned their lessons well. Their combination of mass and speed with flexible improvisation based on success on the battlefield, makes a very formidable opponent. We, as professional soldiers, would do well to carefully study the operational lessons of the Eastern Front and the subsequent impact they have had on today's Soviet army.

NOTES

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