Red Army Doctrine in WWI and WWII

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Introduction
Following the end of World War I and throughout the Great Patriotic War, Soviet military strategy was defined by production and employment of high quantities of military assets to smother the enemy. Soviet strategy prioritized military asset quantity whereas their enemies prioritized quality. Consequently, Soviet victory over their adversaries in both wars came at a bloody cost. In addition, High Red Army casualty rates during the first and second world wars were staggering in comparison with its allies', the result of technological and logistical problems such as the absence of professional training and lack of proper equipment. Perhaps most characteristic of the Red Army was the tenacity with which its superiors expected its soldiers to fight. This wartime philosophy was critical to the success of the Red Army, but at the cost of millions of lives.

World War I and the Origins of the Red Army
The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 marked the beginning of World War I and initiated the July Crisis. German leaders understood the implications of starting a conflict with Serbia, as the nation had Russian support. Additionally, the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1892 declared that France would assist Russia in a conflict with Germany or Austria-Hungary. France was also guaranteed support by Great Britain in the event of war. In response, Germany and Austria-Hungary cooperated to formulate the Schlieffen Plan, a contingency that in the case of war, German military forces would target France then divert their resources towards Russia following France’s defeat. The Schlieffen Plan relied upon the slow deployment of Russian military resources during the attack on France, as the planners doubted that they could sustain a two-front war. On
July 23, 1914, Austria-Hungary sent Serbia an ultimatum that demanded full Serbian submission in shutting down anti-Austro-Hungarian organizations and activists and allowing an Austrian-led investigation on Serbian soil. On July 25, Serbia accepted Austria-Hungary’s demands, except for the requests most intrusive to Serbia’s sovereignty. However, Austria-Hungary required full submission to the ultimatum and subsequently declared war on Serbia on July 28. On July 30, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia agreed for the mobilization of his country’s military. Germany demanded that Russia cease its mobilization, but the request was denied. At the same time, France began mobilizing its military, and after German troops crossed France’s border on August 4, Britain declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. These events marked the beginning of World War I.1

Before World War I, the Russian Army, like its counterparts, relied heavily on conscripting young men during peacetime for a short period before placing them in reserves in case of war. As a result, the Russian Army’s capacity grew significantly by calling on reservists. The Russian Army’s fighting force was unique in that it possessed a large amount of cavalry and had the largest peacetime army, consisting of around 1.4 million men and 40,000 officers which increased to 4.5 million men and 80,000 officers by the start of the war.2 The Russian Army’s key unit, riflemen, were mainly conscripted from peasant populations. The largely illiterate and uneducated nature of Russian peasants put the Army at a disadvantage compared to its adversaries: new military technology of artillery, aircraft, and basic weaponry put a premium on the educated soldier, and as uneducated peasants went to war, they could not effectively utilize their weapon systems and suffered casualties in the millions. Alongside peasants, a smaller population of educated and literate conscripts contributed to the Russian infantry as well as foreign legions, most notably the Czechoslovak Legion which consisted of Czechs, Slovaks, exiles, and former prisoners of war. The Army was equipped with the venerable Mosin-Nagant rifle, Maxim gun, and 76mm field gun. Russia’s slow industrialization at the time did not allow for mass-construction of weapons, and the Army largely had to work with the numbers they had similarly to the Soviets’ experience in World War II, not having enough rifles for every soldier during the Battle of Stalingrad.3

Russia’s military doctrine in World War I pulled from its experience in the Russo-Japanese War, which consisted of large-scale operations utilizing combined arms warfare. During the Russo-Japanese War, Russia gained experience maneuvering large formations while in the presence of Japanese machine guns and artillery. Nevertheless, the Russians were not yet prepared for the destruction of the modern battlefield when entering World War I. As trench warfare led to stalemates, military planners needed to find innovative ways to break the enemy’s line and advance forward. Artillery in conjunction with a mass frontal infantry assault became the Russian Army’s primary method of attack. In combination with the 1912 field service manual and the 1914 “Instruction for Infantry Action in Battle,” the Russian Army formulated a doctrine of suppressing or “fixing” an enemy in position with indirect artillery fire before following-up with an infantry attack that stormed the enemy’s trench with bayonets then pursued them with cavalry.4 Russia’s approach differed from the Western Front armies in that its troops spread out farther over the battlefield rather than concentrating its fighting force in one area.5 This approach would diminish the Red Army’s ability to punch through the enemy’s frontlines during World War I.

The Russian Army’s use of combined arms tactics in the Battle of Galicia, which occurred on August 23, 1914, was one of the most important early victories of the war. Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, planned to launch a major offensive into Russian territory in order to gain an early footing into Poland where he believed newly deployed units would be concentrated.6 Simultaneously, Russia’s commander of the Southwestern Front, Nikolai Ivanov, planned to attack Austro-Hungarian-occupied Galicia.7 The collision of both armies in Galicia resulted in three bloody weeks of fighting. Ivanov employed the use of defensive artillery positions in combination with infantry divisions to launch frontal assaults on the enemy’s front line. These attacks were successful in breaking the front, and cavalry units were used to further pursue the retreating Germans and harass supply lines.8 However, the Russians’ slow mobilization of their forces allowed the German and Austro-Hungarian forces to reconvene and launch successful attacks against Ivanov’s units. The fighting quickly turned into a bloody slugging match as the open

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2 Ziemke, 30-35.
5 Ibid, 102.
7 Ibid, 26.
8 Ibid, 34-38.
terrain allowed machine guns and artillery to decimate maneuvering forces. In the end, the Battle of Galicia resulted in a Russian victory, as they seized Galicia from the Central Powers and crippled their fighting capability. The use of combined arms warfare during the battle further emphasized the need to master the simultaneous use of machine guns, artillery, cavalry, and infantry. This experience in combined arms combat would allow for the extensive use of aircraft, armored vehicles, and infantry on the battlefield during World War II.

The Battle of Tannenberg was another influential battle early in the war that began on August 26, 1914, only a few days after the beginning of the Battle of Galicia. During Russia’s advance into East Prussia, the Russian Army was divided into the First and Second Army. Led by Paul von Rennenkampf, the First Army advanced northeast while the Second Army, commanded by Alexander Samsonov, moved southwest. This separation meant both armies became unable to effectively communicate with and assist one another. This was disastrous when a surprise attack on Samsonov’s forces by the German Eighth Army resulted in the complete encirclement of the Second Army. The Russian Second Army was decisively destroyed, having 92,000 of its soldiers captured and 78,000 killed; only 10,000 escaped. In the northeast, the Germans defeated the First Army due to its inability to communicate with its counterpart and was consequently forced out of East Prussia. The Battle of Tannenberg was so catastrophic to the Russian Army that it would not launch another offensive into German territory for the rest of the war. This battle revealed the necessity for unity in Soviet command. Under a singular commander, both the First and Second Army would have been consolidated into one division led by a single commander. The primary advantage of having unity of command is the ability to effectively and efficiently disseminate information to units within the division. Had these two divisions been combined, they could have assisted one another to defeat the German Eighth Army and potentially maintain its momentum throughout the war. The Soviets would experience a similar issue in the war with Finland during World War II.

Riding on the momentum gained from the Battle of Tannenberg and defeating the Russians in the Carpathians, the Germans launched the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive to alleviate pressure caused by the fighting between the Austro-Hungarians and Russians. This offensive resulted in one of the most influential victories over Russia by the Central Powers. The German Eleventh Army, commanded by General August von Mackensen, launched the offensive because retaking Galicia could encircle the Russian Army and cut off their supply lines, forcing Russian retreat. This was evident in that the biggest contributor to the Russians’ defeat was their lack of equipment and ammunition, specifically for their artillery along with Russian command’s determination to hold the already conquered Galicia. German infantry physician Bernard Bardach recounts his experiences during the Offensive and particularly the Russian’s straining tenacity in holding the territory: “The Russians do not yield, and a violent artillery duel ensues, which lasts until dark, when the Russians finally retreat, leaving about eight hundred prisoners...” The Russian failure during the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive further crippled the Army’s fighting capability while increasing the Central Powers’ confidence in their ability to wage a war of attrition which would later influence that same strategy on the Western Front.

The 1916 Brusilov Offensive was perhaps the Russian Army’s greatest employment of force during the war. Although experienced soldiers and leadership were in short supply at this point in the war, the Russian southwestern forces, under the command of Alexei Brusilov, would go on to severely damage the Austro-Hungarian forces and force them to rely on their German ally. Brusilov expertly employed the use of aircraft in his preparations to photograph the enemy lines and find weak points. During the battle, the Russians used artillery as a prelude for shock troops to advance to the front line and break through. In support of the frontal assault, cavalry units then conducted a flank to disrupt supply lines and communication while also cutting off the enemy’s retreat. Although Brusilov’s preparation and employment was successful, victory came at the expense of his soldiers who suffered around 1.5 million casualties. Russia, despite crippling the Austro-Hungarian Army, could not sustain another offensive of a similar scale for the remainder of the war. The Brusilov Offensive also set a precedent for the use of artillery in doctrine for future battles during World War I and World War II.

10 Ibid, 338.

Interwar Years and the Great Patriotic War

The Revolution and Civil War prompted Soviet military leadership to begin analyzing the military doctrine used in World War I and adapting it to incorporate new military technology and weapon systems. Red Army doctrine during the interwar period (1918-1939) adapted to incorporate new military technology and focused on offensive capacities rather than defensive. Perhaps most important in implementing this doctrine were Soviet commanders. Chief of Operations V. K. Triandafillov analyzed the major operations of World War I and recognized mechanization and its relationship with mobility as a key factor in the offensive’s success, specifically mechanized artillery, armor, and mobile infantry. An armored unit, such as a tank, provided a means to break a stalemate between two forces as they were impervious to small arms fire and allowed infantry to advance, using it as mobile cover. In 1936, Red Army commander and tactician, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, created the Provisional Field Regulation 36 (PU-36) in which he expanded on the concept of mechanized maneuver to include air assets. As aviation technology advanced, the threat of aircraft on the battlefield increased and was at the forefront of military planning. In World War I, aircraft had been used to conduct aerial reconnaissance which provided Russia with the ability to better plan for offensive operations. As World War II approached, the Soviets continued to test and improve technology and doctrine that would later be known as Deep Battle. The Russian Deep Battle doctrine emphasized the destruction, suppression, and interruption of enemy forces both at the front line and into enemy territory. This doctrine was the basis for Red Army doctrine throughout World War II.

As Germany began its invasion of Poland in the fall of 1939, the Soviets began preparing for the possibility of a war with Germany. Due to Finland’s proximity to Russia and its neutrality, Russia worried Finland could provide a forward base for the Nazis to use in an invasion. The Soviets requested that Finland give up certain strategic areas, though the Finnish denied these requests. Thus, the Winter War began between the Soviets and Finnish in November 1939 and continued through March 1940. Although the Soviets possessed a greater capacity to support a prolonged conflict than Finland, the Finnish were more prepared for conflict in the snow and cold. Since the Red Army had rapidly diverted resources to Finland, the Russians had little to no time to perform reconnaissance of the area of operations and had little knowledge of the terrain or Finnish defensive positions.

As the Winter War progressed, the Finnish began noticing patterns in the Soviet doctrine. Artillery would fire for thirty minutes with the occasional air attack from Soviet aircraft. Using this knowledge, the Finnish would time their attacks to begin when the Soviet bombardments had ceased. Soviet tanks were often rendered ineffective, as they were armored too lightly to withstand Finnish anti-tank weapons. Soviet combat engineers also had difficulty destroying Finnish tank traps. The Finnish terrain was furthermore unsuitable for armored combat: the roads were narrow and icy, and the surrounding areas were often heavily wooded, leaving tanks susceptible to ambush. Having experienced continual defeat, the Soviets reconsolidated their air force and army to create a concentrated assaulting force to punch through Finnish defenses which proved to be more effective in quelling Finnish resistance. Eventually, the Finnish military had been exhausted of its resources and endurance and consequently signed the Treaty of Moscow in 1940 that ceded eleven percent of its territory to the Soviets.

Although Russia had won in Finland, the Red Army’s performance was subpar, so reforms followed to address military weaknesses. Red Army training focused heavily on attacking static lines and defensive structures. On the contrary, German blitzkrieg doctrine utilized infantry in conjunction with armored vehicles to rapidly capture territory, shocking the enemy with speed. During Russian training exercises, the cooperation between tanks, infantry, and aircraft remained unaccomplished. Meanwhile, Germany continued to expertly exercise mobility.

The Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 against the Soviet Union in an effort to capitalize on the success of its blitzkrieg through Western Europe. Operation Barbarossa was the largest Nazi invasion of the war, as it deployed between 80 and 100 Wehrmacht divisions across Eastern Europe.

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15 Ibid, 247.
18 Ibid, 119.
19 Ibid, 110.
20 Ibid, 119-120.
Stalin did not believe that the Nazis would launch an invasion against the Soviet Union, thus, the operation took the Red Army by surprise which allowed the Wehrmacht to quickly gain territory.\(^\text{23}\) Though the Nazis gained territory, Hitler’s focus on Ukraine delayed the invasion of Moscow. This delay allowed the Red Army to consolidate its forces in preparation for the German offensive.\(^\text{24}\) The Raspotitsa, a season which consists of rain and moist conditions due to thawing snow, had also arrived which made it difficult for German motorized vehicles and tanks to traverse the muddy roads.\(^\text{25}\) The delay in the Wehrmacht’s advance eventually led to the failure of Operation Barbarossa which marked a turning point in the war in favor of the Allies; battles like that at Stalingrad and Kursk are examples of decisive engagements in which the Germans were crippled. In addition to the delay, the Wehrmacht did not have enough resources to wage a war of attrition with the Soviets. Allied bombardments of German infrastructure and factories crippled the Nazis’ ability to produce military assets like firearms, tanks, and aircraft resulting in the Soviets’ war time production outstripping that of the Nazis. It was this numerical advantage, in terms of military assets, that allowed the Soviets to easily outnumber the Wehrmacht and stop the offensive.\(^\text{26}\)

During the German invasion of Russia, Hitler recognized Stalingrad as a high value target due to its implications for propaganda in that it possessed Stalin’s name. Upon learning of Hitler’s intentions, Stalin called upon all Russians capable of fighting to take up arms in defense of the city. As German and Soviet forces clashed in a bloody battle in the urban streets of Stalingrad, casualties on both sides continued to rise. The Soviet economy and industry could not support the sheer number of soldiers the Red Army was putting into action and as a result were unable to adequately equip every soldier. This left some without weapons with which to fight.\(^\text{27}\) The Red Army was clearly fighting a war of attrition in Stalingrad; they intended to exhaust and overwhelm the Wehrmacht. Here, Stalin gave his famous order, stating that any soldier who retreated or surrendered was subject to military trial or execution. This mentality, while costly, was effective in overwhelming German forces and starving them of supplies. William Hoffman, a German soldier in Stalingrad, described the conditions they endured towards the end of the battle,

> “The horses have already been eaten. I would eat a cat; they say its meat is also tasty. The soldiers look like corpses or lunatics, looking for something to put in their mouths. They no longer take cover from Russian shells; they haven’t the strength to walk, run away and hide. A curse on this war!”\(^\text{28}\)

The defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad fueled the Soviets’ morale and gave the impression that they could outlast the world’s greatest invading force. The battle at Stalingrad marked the emergence of a fanatical approach to winning battles like the frontal charges experienced in World War I. Soviet soldiers were given no choice but to defend against the German onslaught or face death at the hands of their superiors.

In response to Nazi Germany’s defeat at Stalingrad, Hitler launched Operation Citadel to recover in the Eastern Front. The Wehrmacht amassed a large group of infantry, aircraft, artillery, and tanks at the Kursk Bulge. Simultaneously, the Red Army preemptively assembled a formidable defending force of over a million soldiers, tanks, artillery, and aircraft. During the battle itself, Red Army tanks clashed with Wehrmacht tanks all along the Kursk Bulge.\(^\text{29}\) As with infantry, the Soviets prioritized producing a greater number of tanks to overwhelm the Germans. The Soviet T-34 tanks proved to be a potent asset due to their sheer number in comparison to the Germans’ Tiger and Panzer tanks. Germans employed new Panther tanks even without field testing, which were limited in number and prone to mechanical failure. Their advantage, however, was that Russian tank cannons were too weak to penetrate the Tiger and Panther’s armor.\(^\text{30}\) This forced Russian tank crews to engage in close combat with their German counterparts, becoming vulnerable to long-range attacks.\(^\text{31}\)

Throughout Operation Citadel, Soviet tank divisions would engage German SS panzer, or tank, divisions in coordination with aircraft and artillery. This tactic proved to be useful, as the technologically superior German tanks were able to hold

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\(^{23}\) Ibid, 35.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid, 35-36.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid, 325-345.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid, 35-36.  
\(^{28}\) Liddil, 215.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid, 54.
off Soviet armored charges but were ultimately destroyed by hidden Soviet anti-tank guns. Although the Germans had inflicted losses on the Red Army during Operation Citadel, the Soviets were able to withstand the assault and keep their defensive line intact. As Allied forces landed in Sicily, Hitler was forced to abandon Operation Citadel, ending Germany’s hopes of reaching Moscow.

The Red Army greatly enhanced its fighting capability after the Winter War, employing measures to overwhelm its enemy with sheer numbers but at the cost of its soldiers. This was especially true in the German invasion of Russia as the Red Army fought quality with quantity and defend the motherland. The Deep Battle doctrine allowed for the Soviets to employ all aspects of their military to work in conjunction with one another towards a unified goal.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of World War I and World War II, the Russian Army had adapted to the changing political and military battlefield. Changes to Red Army doctrine primarily arose from raw combat experience and the evolution of military technology. The Red Army heavily relied on outproducing its enemies in terms of infantry, tanks, and aircraft. A consequence of this strategy was that the assets produced were often technologically obsolete. From an operational standpoint, however, they were successful in their ability to smother and destroy the enemy in combat. Through this, Russia’s military remained a potent adversary throughout the course of the early 20th Century.

Bibliography


32 Ibid, 247-287.

