The Soviet Formula for Success in World War II: Deep Operations to Defense in Depth
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From the time of Peter the Great, Russia embarked on path to increase their military strength that made it possible for it to become one of the greatest powers of the world. In the process, military doctrine evolved and changed to meet the circumstances of the day. When Peter assumed the throne in 1689, it was a thoroughly medieval dictatorship, untouched by the modernization trends in the West. Although Russia had fought sporadic wars with Poland, Sweden, and Turkey during the seventeenth century, its approach to war remained medieval. This changed rapidly under Peter the Great and began the integration of western military thinking. In his book *War and the Rise of the Nation State*, Bruce Porter cites the Russian historian Vasili Klyuchevsky who maintains that overtaking the West militarily was the undeviating goal of Peter's reform program. This obsession passed onto his successors as well, launching Russia on a three-century-long course of formidable efforts to keep pace with the Western military advances. In her essay *The Making of Soviet Strategy* Condoleezza Rice writes that by 1928, Russian military thinking, lead by V. Triandifilov, the head of operations and administration of the Red Army, began to evolve into a theory of successive operations. He argued that decisive victory could only be achieved if the enemy did not have an opportunity to regroup. Triandifilov's concept was further developed into a doctrine of deep operations and war of maneuver. However, by the time of the German invasion of Russia on June 22, 1941, advocates of positional warfare, a strategy dependent on defensive fortifications and maintenance of territorial position, were beginning to have a voice in military policy formation but the invasion did not allow time to change the course of Soviet thought and training. As a result, the Soviets were caught between preparations for the war of maneuver and the war of position. As the war went on, the Soviet response to the German invasion changed from a strategy of deep operations, utilizing cavalry and mechanized formations, to one of defense in depth, which involved command and control changes, a reorganization of the force, rapid reconstitution of formations, the relocation of industries to the east, and a scorched earth policy. The Soviets went to great lengths to encourage their forces to defend in depth and to use active, flexible tactics. This change in strategy eventually permitted the Soviet army to return to the offensive and defeat the German army.

To better understand how Russian military thought and doctrine evolved to deep operations, it is helpful to go back to the time of Peter the Great. In some ways, the new Russian empire under Peter resembled the new kingdom of Prussia. In both countries, the state arose primarily as a means of supporting a modern army. Russia developed autocratically, in conjunction with a landlord class which was intimidated into state service and which in turn held peasantry in serfdom. In the eighteenth century Peter achieved Russia's expansion into Europe and its transformation into the Russian Empire through several major initiatives. He established Russia's naval forces, reorganized the army according to European models, streamlined the government, and mobilized Russia's financial and human resources. Under Peter, the army drafted soldiers for lifetime terms from the taxpaying population and it drew officers from the nobility. In 1722, Peter introduced the Table of Ranks, which determined a person's position and status according to service to the Tsar rather than to birth or seniority. Even commoners who achieved a certain level on the table were ennobled automatically. Peter wanted to equip Russia with modern technology, institutions, and ideas. Peter's reign raised questions about Russia's backwardness, its relationship to the West, the appropriateness of reform from above, and other fundamental problems that have confronted many of Russia's subsequent rulers.

Whatever the differences, past and present, Russian culture has its roots in the same ultimate sources as the rest of Europe. It is as much the closeness as the differences that have made it difficult for Russians to know where they stand. They struggled with the question of how much of Western culture in general is Western European but not Russian and therefore to be consciously

borrowed or rejected. They searched for what is uniquely Russian. Military thinkers shared this central concern of Russian intellectuals. The search for the “Russian art of war” was a central issue in nineteenth century Russian military writing. One of the issues related to the search for the Russian identity was the issue of serfdom. Throughout the eighteenth century and through the end of the Napoleonic Wars the serf system, whatever its moral and other faults, posed no problem for the Russian army. On the contrary, it strengthened the army, and helped make it what it was. The harsh but effective forcible enrolling a relatively small number of serfs for lifetime service to maintain a large standing army of professional soldiers was the basis of Russia’s successes from 1709 to the mid-nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century this system was perhaps more satisfactory than the mixture of conscription and mercenary service that characterized the armies of old regime Western Europe. Russian peasant soldiers were paid virtually nothing. Once the trauma of recruitment and transportation to their regiments, during which many fled, was over, desertion was very low in comparison with the high rates reported in the West. The Prussian military model, which they adopted with great success, impressed Russian commanders in the eighteenth century.

Later in the century, under perhaps the greatest of all Russian commanders, Alexander Suvorov, is were some of the innovations in tactics were employed. They included forced marches and order. Suvorov was above all an inspired leader of men and clearly recognized the value of the peasant soldier. He demonstrated that the Russian military system at the end of the eighteenth century was capable of adopting new tactics and of competing with the best the West could offer. The Russian mobilization system and military effort as a whole proved capable of defeating Napoleon’s armies in 1812. Russia had entered the nineteenth century with the practical experience of military success, in part because of the distinctive characteristic of their social and political order. The emerging notion of a Russian art of war was greatly influenced by the French Revolutionary Era, which stressed the national element as a force making men fight with loyalty and enthusiasm. This notion and the associated concept of an army based on universal service and a large trained reserve or militia were the most important features of the thought of the younger generation of progressive military officers. This contributed to the conservatism of military thought during the reign of Nicholas I.

The army and military values played a dominant role in the reigns of Alexander I and Nicholas I. After 1855, as the economy expanded and society became more complex, the army lost some of its former hold over the lives of the upper classes. It was during the reign of Nicholas that major changes in the balance between military and civilian society began to take place. Despite the huge standing army that was maintained after the Napoleonic Era, the rapid growth of the civil bureaucracy meant that by the middle of the century civil officials for the first time outnumbered military officers. Taking shape was the idea that improvements in weapons and techniques of defensive warfare increased the nation’s ability in war. The Russian policy under Nicholas was to maintain a large standing army that would preserve the European status quo and to create a policy of deterrence.

The defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the death of Nicholas marked the end of the old regime in the Russian military. The Crimean War demonstrated to Russians that the military balance in Europe had shifted since the war with Napoleon and that the advantages Russia had enjoyed no longer sufficed. The biggest challenge facing Russian military planners were the fundamental changes that involved the mobilization, transportation, and organization of men and materiel. European powers were developing the means to mobilize the entire society for war to an unprecedented extent. The Russian leadership to this point still had the advantage of being able to conscript peasants for life. By the mid-nineteenth century, modern administrative techniques, mass education, and railroad transport made it possible for Germany, France, and Austria to turn a high proportion of the adult male population into trained soldiers, available on short notice. This basic strategic problem confronted the Russian military in the post Crimean period.

Emerging from the bureaucracy of Nicholas I were a group of reformers who launched a wide range of major projects that were called the Era of the Great Reforms. The emancipation of serfdom was a centerpiece of the reforms. The main goals of the reform programs were to improve the administrative structure of the military, to shift to a system of short-term service with a reduced standing army and a large reserve force, and to raise the quality of military education of officers and enlisted soldiers. All of these efforts and especially the introduction of general conscription and improved education had broad public implications. By the mid 1870s, Russia had in place the basic structure of a modern continental European military system. The problem now was how to make it work and to develop a force comparable to that of the other major Continental powers. Manpower was no longer the issue. Russia introduced weapons comparable to those of its rivals. The basic problem was the budget and the size of the army. Even aside from a less than efficient administration, the long frontiers and the less extensive railroad network meant slower mobilization and the need for larger standing forces. It was believed that illiterate Russian peasants needed longer training than their Western counterparts did.

Russian military thought in the post-reform era down to the First World War did not focus on the growing problem of modern industrial war. Rather it centered on a historical dispute over the Russian art of war. Its advocates were intelligent men with a sense of mission and a pride in the military achievements of their nation that was stimulated by the general growth of Russian nationalism in the second half of the century. The humiliation of the Crimean War and the less than brilliant showing of Russia against Turkey (1877–1878) caused them to seek solutions in their own traditions, a search that lead inevitably back to Peter the Great and to Suvorov. The prevailing thought about war that developed was the basic notion that what really mattered in war is the will of men to fight. Defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1905-1905) and the simultaneous near-revolution in Russia produced much discussion within military circles but no consensus beyond the need to strengthen the armed forces. Despite the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War about the importance of modern firepower and the difficulty of attacking entrenched positions, military thought did not change. The spirit and enthusiasm of the Japanese troops reinforced the Russian basic belief in the importance of morale.

After the Russo-Japanese War, General A. A. Neznamov, representing the "cutting edge" of pre-1914 Russian military thought, wrote in favor of deep offensive operations carried out not by cavalry but by strong combined-arms units to seize positions, such as mountain passes, necessary to continue the advance. The Red Army was more successful in the fluid fighting of the 1917-1921 Civil War, which included the use of forward detachments in the enemy's rear in the Urals, than the Imperial army had been in static warfare against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Red Army military thinkers soon exhibited a preference for maneuver over attrition warfare, as did Western strategists such as Fuller and Liddell-Hart.

Russia's large population enabled it to field a greater number of troops than Austria-Hungary and Germany combined in World War I, but its underdeveloped industrial base meant that its soldiers were as poorly armed as those of the Austro-Hungarian army were. In most engagements, the larger Russian armies defeated the Austro-Hungarians but suffered reverses against German forces. One of Russia's two invading armies was almost totally destroyed at the disastrous Battle of Tannenberg. In 1916, the Germans planned to drive France out of the war with a large-scale attack in the Verdun area, but a new Russian offensive against Austria-Hungary drew German troops from the west. These actions left major fronts stable and both Russia and Germany pessimistic about victory.

The onset of World War I exposed the weakness of Nicholas II's government. A show of national unity had accompanied Russia's entrance into the war, with defense of the Slavic Serbs the main

battle cry. In the summer of 1914, the *Duma* (Representative Assembly) and the regional governmental committees expressed full support for the government's war effort. The initial conscription was well organized and peaceful, and the early phase of Russia's military buildup showed that the empire had learned lessons from the Russo-Japanese War. However, military reversals and the government's incompetence soon soured much of the population. While the central government was hampered by court intrigue, the strain of the war began to cause popular unrest. In 1916, high food prices and fuel shortages caused strikes in some cities. Workers, who had won the right to representation in sections of the War Industries Committee, used those sections as organs of political opposition. The countryside also was becoming impatient. Soldiers were increasingly insubordinate, particularly the newly recruited peasants who faced the prospect of being used as cannon fodder in the inept conduct of the war. The situation continued to deteriorate. In early 1917, deteriorating rail transport caused acute food and fuel shortages, which resulted in riots and strikes. Public support for the tsarist regime simply evaporated in 1917, ending three centuries of Romanov rule and the Russian revolution followed bringing a new military strategy.

Condoleezza Rice describes how the new Soviet military strategy had two parts: the political-military side, which attempted to define the purpose and character of military power, and the military-technical side, which determines how Soviet military forces will operate in the field. Until 1927, the Bolsheviks were preoccupied with the former. She writes: “Those issues settled, greater attention was given to strategic and operational issues. One of the outstanding characteristics of the late twenties and early thirties was the freedom of debate in the Red Army. The breadth and intensity of the debate is in marked contrast to the period a few years later, when Stalinist military science and the infallibility of Stalin himself crippled Soviet military thought. The exchange of ideas took place in a period in which the battlefield was changing rapidly. Soviet strategists regarded themselves as apart of the international community of military thinkers. The significance of the Russian Revolution was naturally upheld, but emphasis on the special character of ‘the people's warfare’ began to give way to hard analysis of the requirements of the new battlefield.”

European soldiers were haunted by the costly trench warfare of the First World War, and the new technologies, particularly the tank, were thought to provide potential answers to the problem but the effective use of armor was not yet self-evident. Early solutions envisioned simply the incorporation of armor into existing battlefield arrangements, using tanks in support of infantry to break through the enemy lines, for example. Slowly, the potential for revolutionary new forms of warfare was recognized. The first treatise on this new warfare was written around 1928 by the head of the operations administration of the Red Army staff, V. Triandifilov. Triandifilov laid out a case for “successive operations” in battle. He argued that decisive victory could only be achieved if the enemy did not have an opportunity to regroup. He devoted considerable attention, therefore, not just to breaking through the enemy lines, but also to exploiting the penetration to deliver a decisive and annihilating blow. This theory of “successive operations” recognized the potential that armor, with more increased mobility and speed, held for deep operations. In the First World War, battle had usually been linear, concentrating on penetrating enemy lines. Triandifilov’s formulation recognized the importance of operating in depth against the enemy’s supporting units and lines of communication. The new Soviet theorists broadly agreed that future war would be long and would involve large armies. By the late 1920s, it was accepted that the army needed to modernize. Mikhail Tukhahevsky, who in 1928 was commander of the Leningrad Military District, was able to experiment with new ideas. His conclusions identified him as a proponent for modernization and mechanization. He said, “Revolutionary spirit, without the necessary equipment, cannot triumph in a future war.”

By 1932, the Red Army was at the forefront of efforts to develop the link between tactics and strategy into an operational doctrine. Mechanization of the force began to give the Red Army the

means to conduct battles in accordance with the key tenets developed under the broad title of operational art of war. Technological advances incorporating increased weapon ranges, mobility, and destructive power now enabled the Red Army to strike the enemy simultaneously throughout the entire depth of his position. This view of the new battlefield won supporters in the Soviet military hierarchy, and plans for equipping and training the Red Army were increasingly formulated on the basis of combined-arms operations in depth.

The new Red Army faced dangers rising in both the East and West. Japan's designs on Siberia and the weakness of Soviet Far Eastern defenses were cause for concern. Soviet forces were placed on alert and moved to the Soviet-Manchurian border. From 1933 to 1936, relations between the Soviets and Japanese were strained. Eventually, skillful diplomacy, the deterrent effect of a Soviet buildup and the creation of the Soviet Pacific Fleet in the East prevented war with Japan. Trends in the West were equally disturbing with Hitler's rise to power. Some, among the members of the Soviet High Command, were convinced that the threat lay primarily to the West. Preparatory steps were taken there as well, with the shifting of Soviet forces to the European theater of operations, the construction of supply facilities, the hurried mobilization and training of reserves. In spite of their concern about German danger, Soviet commanders continued their contacts with their former "Prussian" collaborators and some began to question the anti-German front forming in the West. Stalin, engaged in delicately balanced diplomatic maneuvers, was apparently troubled by the tendency of some of his officers, among them the independent Tukhahevsky, to depart from strictly military concerns. Stalin believed he had overwhelming evidence that many generals were pro-German and politically unreliable. In 1937, the secret police moved quickly and massively against the Red Army Command. Roughly, sixty percent of officers at the level of division commander or above were purged and killed, including Tukhahevsky.

Stalin's purges silenced the doctrine of deep penetration. Proponents of positional warfare, a strategy dependent on defensive fortifications and maintenance of territorial position, began to reformulate military strategy. Operating in a chaotic environment, however, they did not have time to change the course of Soviet training and thought. As a result, the Soviets were caught between preparations for the war of maneuver and the war of position, and were not ready for either. Stalin was convinced that the coming war would have two phases. The first would involve the capitalist powers, with the Soviet Union neutral in the conflict. Stalin felt the key was to prolong the first phase as long as possible. He was so fearful of provoking war with Germany that he refused to allow the High Command to undertake precautionary mobilization of forces, even when irrefutable evidence of German troop movements was available. When war did come on June 22, 1941, the Soviet state was not fully prepared. As in 1918, the Germans were only a few hundred kilometers short of destroying Russia. Still caught between two military doctrines, the Soviet forces fought so poorly that Western intelligence estimated the fall of Moscow in four weeks.

In *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, Earl Ziemke describes how under the shock of invasion, the Soviet Government responded predictably with a series of decisions aimed at centralizing military and political controls and strengthening the influence of the Communist Party. Secret police units were organized to set up blocking detachments behind the front to catch stragglers and prevent unauthorized retreats. On the frontier, surprise soon turned to confusion and in not a few instances panic. To hold with the first echelon until a counterattack could be prepared remained the whole basis of the initial Soviet strategy. A reserve front of four armies created on the third day of the invasion in the most endangered sector due west of Moscow was first ordered to be ready to counterattack. Still trying to halt the retreat, Stalin had the Commanding General of the West Front and his staff shot. Henceforth an officer who permitted a retreat forfeited his life.

The German invasion forced the Soviet regime to do far more than redeploy the five armies of its

reserve. During the first weeks of the war, Moscow made fundamental changes in its command and control, unit organization, and military industrial plant location. In the crisis, the Soviets temporarily abandoned many of their prewar doctrinal concepts, making the first of many painful but effective adjustments to the reality of modern war. The process of Soviet adjustment to the challenges of war continued during the winter and spring of 1941-1942. Throughout 1941, most Soviet commanders had attempted to apply the prewar concept of deep operation without having sufficient forces to achieve the necessary concentration at a critical point. In December 1941, Marshal Zhukov ordered the creation within the Western Front of shock groups to concentrate the few available full-strength units at specific weak points in the German defenses. This technique, plus fresh troops from the Soviet eastern military districts, allowed the Moscow counteroffensive to achieve initial success. However, the German Army foiled these initial successes.

Soviet leadership began to realize that they had to make adjustments in the way they fought the war. Entire industries were moved eastward to the Ural Mountains and space was traded for time. The most important alteration occurred in the area of defensive strategy and tactics. When the Russians did retreat, they had found it difficult to maintain order. The most successful part of the Soviet retreat, the scorched-earth policy, was learned through experience. This policy involved the total destruction of everything in their path, as they retreated, that might be usable to the Germans. The lack of attention to defense was reversed with the Field Regulation of 1942, which stated that defense was a normal from of combat. However, offense was still hailed as the fundamental aspect of combat action for the Red Army. The Soviets went to great lengths to encourage their forces to defend in depth and to use active, flexible tactics.

Slowly, the Soviet command began to reverse the catastrophic events of early 1941 and 1942. The entire country was enlisted in the support of the war. Large portions of Soviet industry were moved eastward, sometimes brick by brick, out of the reach of the advancing Germans. In seeking support from the population, Stalin dropped distinctions between proletarian and peasant, communist and nationalist. Effective resistance by the population helped bolster the efforts of the Soviet forces at the front. They were stirred by the heroic music of the finest Soviet composers that was written expressly for the war effort. The battle against the Germans became a struggle for Mother Russia, and was called the “Great Patriotic War.” The leadership of the Red performance improved in the course of fighting through initiative and flexibility in the field. The Army improved as commanders who lacked ability failed to survive. Soviet soldiers did not know how to maneuver defensively. According to German observers, they stubbornly held their positions well beyond the point at which retreat would have been advisable. The troops were told that if captured by the Germans, unthinkable acts of brutality and torture would occur. One of the reasons for their stubbornness of the Russian soldiers were the political commissars assigned to front line units with orders to shoot anyone who did not fight. The commissars countersigned every order issued and signed by military commanders, down to regimental or equivalent level. They were involved in launching tactically senseless attacks and accepted catastrophic losses to slow the Germans, and convince the people that they could halt the invader.

On the evening of January 5, 1942, the Soviet High Command assembled for a fateful meeting. On the agenda was the scope, form and timing of the Red Army’s offensive operations, the transition to a general counteroffensive, which, with the Wehrmacht now reeling and shocked by the Red Army’s stand at Moscow, could be of immense significance for the course of the war. John Erickson describes in *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin’s War with Germany* how Stalin viewed the Germanys to be in disarray because of their defeat at Moscow and their exposure to the harsh winter. The High Command believed this moment to be favorable for the transition from defense to offense. The plan of offensive operations was planed on a large scale. Instead of concentrating on German Army Group Center, they proposed to expand outwardly to every Soviet front. Some in the High Command did not believe that the large offensive could be logistically supported. Stalin stated: “We must grind the Germans down with all speed, so that they cannot attack in the

spring." With this, the conduct of the war changed from Defense in Depth to Deep Operations.

By January 1942, however, the Russian attackers were spread out and lacked the mobility to move faster than their German opponents. Although Stalin never admitted his failure to mass forces, the Red Army institutionalized such concentrations for future operations. All front commanders were required to use shock groups for offensive action, focusing their forces on a narrow frontage to achieve overwhelming superiority of strength against a single German unit. In addition to endorsing the concept of massing forces in depth for offensive breakthroughs and exploitation, some Soviet commanders embraced the idea of density and depth in defensive systems. The brief taste of victory from December 1941 to January 1942 encouraged the Soviet dictator to believe that his opponents were vulnerable if the Red Army could mass sufficient mechanized forces to launch a renewed offensive in the summer of 1942. New mechanized forces required new equipment. Despite the enormous dislocation involved in relocation its industry, the Soviet Union was already beginning to out-produce German factories. During the lull of early 1942, the Russians sought to return to prewar concepts and organization. In order to match the German panzer forces; the Russians resurrected the idea of independent, combined-armed mechanized units. The successful defense of Moscow and Leningrad, in which dense, integrated trench systems were first used, set a precedent in the neglected field of defensive tactics. Antitank defenses, whereby minefields and antitank guns were designed to support each other, were finally established along the most likely avenues of enemy attack. In practice, most commanders lacked the forces necessary to establish such defenses until 1943, but the concept and the first few tentative experiments were in place by the spring of 1942. Eventually, the improvement in defensive operations gave the Soviets the opportunity to return to the offensive operations they had been training for before Stalin's purges. Counterattacks were used successfully in conjunction with defense after 1942, but the decisive phase of the war really arrived in the fall of 1942 at Stalingrad, the battle hailed by the Soviets as the turning point of the war. There, the Soviets finally fought the war of maneuver for which they had prepared. At Stalingrad and later at the decisive battle of Kursk, the Soviets relied on surprise, maneuver, overwhelming firepower, and aimed at the annihilation of the enemy. The use of armor for operations in depth was finally achieved.

As the war in the Soviet Union entered its third year in the spring of 1943, Soviet planning for the coming summer concentrated on offensive operations. Ziemke writes: "One consideration which must have weighed heavily in the Soviet High Command's decision to undertake a summer offensive was the knowledge that the Soviet Army had passed beyond its apprenticeship." In two years, Stalin's generals had learned much and, not content to be blind imitators, had adapted the German methods to suit their own capabilities and limitations. While they had not attained the facility of the Germans, they had, at least at the upper command levels, acquired the flexibility so conspicuously lacking earlier. Additionally, they had improved their large-scale offensive tactics. The German technique of blitzkrieg had been to deliver the decisive stroke with precision, speed, and economy of effort. Its distinguishing characteristics had been penetration and avoidance of broad frontal engagements. To the German staffs the concentration of force at the most advantageous point was the very core of military art. The Russians, on the other hand, favored a broader lateral scope and more conservative execution. They adopted the breakthrough and penetration as basic tactical maneuvers bur preferred to achieve the decisive effect by a few deep thrusts. They also accepted the breadth of the front rather than by one or a few deep thrusts. They also accepted the principle of the concentration of force at the most advantageous point, but usually their concentration in the zone of the main effort was less pronounced than in the German practice. For the Russians, the main effort was usually built up by successive thrusts.

The Russians claimed that Stalingrad was the classic encirclement battle, however, they did not employ the double envelopment as frequently as did the Germans. More often, they were content with a single thrust or multiple thrusts, the objective being not so much to achieve a deep

penetration along one line of advance as to force the opponent back on a broad front. Those tactics were particularly suited to southern Russia where the successive, roughly parallel rivers afforded natural defensive lines. Thrusts from one river line to the next could be depended on to bring the German front with them. The first objective of German offensives, in theory at least, had been to annihilate the enemy main force quickly. The purpose was not to gain ground or merely alter the respective positions of the opposing forces but to produce a decision. The Russians, for their part, cared less for speed or the fatal stroke; they were content to wear the enemy down blow by blow. Ziemke states: “Contrary to the general conception that the Russians were relatively indifferent to geographical space, they were inclined to recon their victories as much in terms of ground regained as in terms of damage to the enemy or other tactical advantage. Their ultimate objective was to annihilate the enemy, but by the cumulative effect of repeated offensives, not by the single battle – by weight rather than by the skillful blow.”

As they transitioned from defensive operations, the Russian depth of their single thrust was limited by considerations of control and supply. Since the offensive by nature made it difficult to plan in detail beyond the first few days of fighting, increasingly unforeseeable factors came into play as the advance proceeded. The result was that the burdens on the initiative and judgment of the field commander, and on the troops themselves, increased. The Soviet supply system, while it could on occasion perform near miracles of improvisation, was not equipped or organized to handle in a routine fashion the logistics of rapid advances over long distances. The Soviet soldier, who subsisted almost exclusively on what he could carry in the sack he customarily slung over his shoulder, out of necessity, was an expert scrounger. The armies were expected to forage and collect booty.

In the last days of February 1944, the Russians had moved the front over two hundred miles to the west in less than three month, and as they withdrew the Germans devastated the whole countryside and razed the towns. It was the Russian’s first experience of an offensive war of movement on a large scale, and they were finding it very different from the fluid fighting of 1941 and 1942, when they had been falling back toward their supply dumps and railheads. During that period, the forward troops had always been traveling to meet, instead of away from, supplies and reinforcements. By July 1944, the Red Army occupied all of eastern Poland, the very boundaries, that they had seized in 1939. The Red Army, now very powerful, continued west decimating the German Army along the way finally ending its offensive with the capture of Berlin and the surrender of the German army.

Since the time of Peter the Great, Russia has adopted the military methods of the west while developing its own unique character in the evolution of military thought. Filled with contradictions, the tensions between political activity and the military offensive remained largely unresolved until after the German invasion in 1941. The Soviet fixation on offensive forces, concepts, and techniques in the late 1920s and 1930s obscured similar work on defense at the strategic, operational, and tactical level. Soviet brainpower and resources focused on the creation of shock armies, mechanized forces, and airborne forces; all those elements critical to achieving strategic offensive success through the conduct of deep operations and deep battle. By the Soviet’s own admission, this fixation on the offensive caused them to pay too little attention to strategic, operational, and tactical level defensive operations, a deficiency vividly evident in 1941.

Soviet victory on the Eastern Front was a product first and foremost of the Soviet defensive effort. Only successful defense could have paved the way for offensive victory. Moreover, the development of strategic and operational defenses depended directly on the Soviet ability to stop German offensive action at the tactical level. Soviet development of effective tactical defenses was a long and difficult process. It involved changing the offensive mind-set of Soviet officers. It also entailed the training of a generation of officers capable of ably controlling forces at the tactical level and the fielding of equipment of the type and in the numbers necessary

to conduct successful combined arms defense. Development of tactical defense concepts involved a process of education that began in June 1941 and continued throughout the war. The fruits of that education were apparent at the Battle of Kursk. By February 14, 1943, the Soviets seemed unstoppable, recapturing the major city of Kharkov from the Germans. The Red Army war machine had grown more powerful while that of the Germans proportionally declined.

By 1945, Russian military thinking had evolved to the point where the political and military lines became blurred. The ability to mobilize industry to support a protracted war was decisive. The determination of the Soviet soldier and the ability of the command to mobilize, train, and commit a never-ending supply of manpower triumphed over the enemy. Although the “Great Patriotic War” taught Russia never again to ignore defensive preparation, the counteroffensives launched at Stalingrad and Kursk vindicated the predominance of the offense on which the modern Soviet military thought was founded. German forces overextended and stretched thinly into hostile territory, were ultimately no match for the vastness of a Russia and the evolved Russian military thought put into action. Just as Russia had entered the nineteenth century with the practical experience of military success, in part because of the distinctive characteristic of their social and political order, they won in World War II for many of the same reasons not the least was the transition from Deep Operations to Defense in Depth and back to the offensive when the time was right.

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