Thinking Beyond Dead Germans

Bias and our warped orientation on the Russian adversary

by Capt Zachary Schwartz

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Recent articles in the *Marine Corps Gazette* have shed renewed light on the influence of German Military history, particularly the German military of World War II, on the Marine Corps and the Maneuver Warfare Movement. This influence is undeniable and has been critical to the development of our warfighting doctrine; however, a series of biases are inherent in our embrace of the German military experience. These biases deeply effect our understanding of World War II Germany's most hated adversary: Russia. To fully understand and execute maneuver warfare, we must be able to ferret out the prejudices affecting our own orientations. To this day, a warped understanding of the Russian way of war afflicts many Marines. The preconceptions driving this misunderstanding have been a part of the Maneuver Warfare Movement since its inception and can be traced back to the Marine Corps' embrace of World War II German military history. These preferences must be understood and guarded against if the Marine Corps is to prevail against our current adversaries.

Walk around any unit in the Marine Corps today and ask about the Soviet contribution to World War II. The general responses you receive will probably average out to "human wave attacks, vast superiority in people and material, and moronic lack of ingenuity or tactics."[1] This opinion often traces its roots to Hollywood dramas such as *Enemy at the Gates* and *Cross of Iron*. It is further solidified by the deep-rooted tradition of Marines reading the often "self-serving accounts" of German commanders who typically "minimized mistakes made by the authors, omitted information that would have been embarrassing and placed the blame for fiascos on third parties."[2] You can probably go to your unit library right now and find well-worn editions of Gen Heinz Guderian's *Panzer Leader*, Gen Friedrich von Mellenthin *Panzer Battles,* and the achingly titled *Lost Victories* by Field Marshal Erich Von Manstein. These memoirs are shot through with a running theme: "The German Soldier ... has not been beaten on his merits but has simply been crushed by overwhelming masses of material."[3] This is not to mention the undercurrent of often unrepentant Nazism and racial animus commonly found in these accounts, to include the myth of the *Heer* as a wholly professional and blameless army that was "untouched by ... the crimes of the regime."[4]

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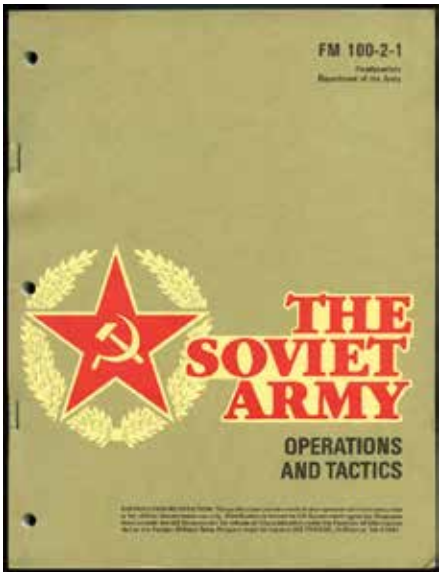
In the post-World War II years, with the rapid souring of international relations that commenced the Cold War, the United States conveniently and pragmatically propped up and promoted the narrative of the nobility and strength of German arms against the Communist threat.[5] American military leaders began to accept and study the often-slanted accounts of *SS* and *Heer* officers. This uncomfortable acceptance of Nazi commanders continues to this day. In 2019, the Department of Defense Facebook page posted a stylized photo of SS tank commander Joachim Peiper in commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge. The post was instantly decried by civilians and military members alike, particularly since Peiper was an avowed racist "who ordered the massacre of 84 U.S. prisoners of war" in what became known as the Malmedy Massacre.[6] The founders of the Maneuver Warfare Movement were a product of their times and hardly immune to the pitfalls of Nazi fetishization.

German military history appealed deeply, and with good reason, to the pioneers of maneuver warfare. "For a Marine Corps that would rarely enjoy a preponderance of forces and thus the ability to control wide swathes of terrain,"[7] the striking examples of German armored spearheads encircling and liquidating Soviet armies provided exciting and useful intellectual fodder. Col John Boyd, USAF, often seen as the intellectual godfather of maneuver warfare, was particularly interested in the *Blitzkrieg* and the "glue" of *finger-*

spitzengefühl ("fingertip feeling").[8] Boyd was also heavily influenced by the accounts of World War II German commanders. He saw Manstein's February 1943 "Donetz counterstroke" as a superb example of "unhinging an enemy" and often referenced *Lost Victories*. It is not difficult to imagine an unconscious assumption of Manstein's own biases by Boyd, especially since Boyd argued that "historically ... the Russians' only real strength in war came from a large population that was used as cannon fodder."[9]

As Boyd lifted up and analyzed the German military experience, so did his associates. From Mr. Bill Lind to Col Mike Wyly, the proponents of maneuver warfare turned to the World War II German army for examples to emulate and study. In the face of "hot" conflict against the highly mechanized hordes of the Red Army, articles referencing the experiences of Guderian, Rommel, Mellenthin, and Manstein became frequent features in the *Marine Corps Gazette* through the Cold War era.[10] Gradually, the Soviet army became a faceless tackling dummy, synonymous with attrition, intellectual torpor, and a paralyzing obsession with "detailed control by a centralized decision-making node."[11]

An incestuous amplifier to this growing German "echo chamber" was the lack of Russian source material. During the Cold War, little historical material on World War II was allowed to seep through the Iron Curtain to Western sources. The accounts that did were often hagiographic biographies of Red Army commanders who "covered the Soviet Army with glory by their unprecedented valour in delivering Europe from the brown plague of Nazism."[12] These sources were hobbled by Soviet censorship as well as Marxist-Leninist propagandizing and "up to 60 percent of the war's [Eastern Front] content remained largely conjecture" until as late as 1995, when the Russian Ministry of Defense archives were gradually opened.[13] With only the accounts of the defeated to study, the pioneers of maneuver warfare forged ahead while their collective orientation on the Russian adversary slipped farther from reality.



The* FM 100-2 *series of field manuals were the standard references for opposing forces in training exercises, wargames and PME throughout the 1980s.

Despite the commonly accepted historiography delivered by post-World War II German sources, Russian military history has much to offer the dedicated maneuverist in the realm of warfighting education. Furthermore, this history can help us orient on our modern peer adversary: the Russian Federation. Russian military history spans over 1,000 years but even just focusing on the Soviet era yields valuable insights. Emerging from the Russian Civil War, the Red Army entered a period of professionalization and academic rigor championed by officers such as Defence Minister Mikhail V. Frunze and Chief of the General Staff Mikhail Tukhachevsky. In the early 1920s and 1930s, the Red Army was "open to innovative thinking about military affairs" with "lively debates ... about military strategy, tactics, and technology"[14] taking place between leaders on junior and senior levels.

Because of its role in defending the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the army "was allowed to maintain an unusually creative and dynamic environment in a Soviet system in which independent thinking was increasingly frowned upon."[15] This environment not only began to shape the minds of the generation of leaders who would defeat Nazi Germany (regimental and battalion commanders at the time), but it also allowed the creation of operational art, doctrine for combined arms, and deep battle, or the "combined operations of tanks, artillery, aircraft, motorized infantry, and airborne troops, striking rapidly and deeply into enemy territory and defenses."[16] The Red Army developed and field tested its first mechanized corps and accompanying doctrine "three years before Germany created its first panzer divisions."[17] This progressive blossoming would enable the young corps commander Georgy Zhukov (eventual Marshal of the Soviet Union and Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army) to utilize combined arms and rapid mechanized envelopment to encircle and soundly defeat Japanese forces at Kalkhin-Gol in Mongolia in 1939.[18]

Just as the Soviet investment in military education and reform provides a case study in victory, Joseph Stalin's purge of the Red Army in the late 1930s provides a stark example of the caustic price of mistrust, yes-men, and institutional paranoia. From 1937 through 1939, "2 heads of the Red Air Force, 15 admirals ... 3 of the 5 marshals of the Soviet Union ... 136 of 139 division commanders ... and 50 percent of all regimental commanders were ... disgraced ... imprisoned or executed," as Stalin sought to remove any potential rivals to his power.[19] Underperforming but docile officers along with extremely junior commanders filled the resulting vacuum across the Red Army. Zhukov's victory at Khalkhin-Gol and the physical distance of his command from Moscow preserved him to fight another day. With its chain of command shaken to the core, the once progressive Red Army stagnated. The 1939 Russo-Finnish War proved this point, with undertrained and unimaginative commanders smashing their unprepared and unmotivated troops against the defenses of Finland's Mannerheim Line in a bloody embarrassment for the USSR. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and the resulting war of annihilation would be the catalyst for transforming the humiliated and unprepared Red Army into arguably

the most capable military force in the history of World War II.

All bias and self-promotion aside, the German accounts of the invasion of the USSR are a testament to the *Wehrmacht's* combat capability. The Red Army was thrown back on its heels as literally millions of its soldiers, tanks, planes, trucks, and guns were captured or destroyed. But in the struggle for survival, the Red Army reinvented itself. The German invasion began on 22 June, but by mid-July Soviet resistance was stiffening. Combat was weeding out Red Army commanders, allowing a core of capable leaders to step up. Gen Konstantin K. Rokossovsky, imprisoned during the purge and released in time for the war, "assembled a motley collection of shattered units and stragglers" outside Yartsevo, Russia.[20] With only a handful of obsolete tanks and in spite of *Luftwaffe* air superiority, "Group Rokossovsky" halted 7th Panzer division utilizing a "mobile, flexible defense"[21] and then joined the first major Soviet counteroffensive of the war. For the first time, the juggernaut German Army Group Center was forced to conduct a defense, "a task for which they were neither structured nor accustomed."[22] The ability of Red Army commanders to forge capable combat formations from scratch, often while in contact with the enemy, and then defend and counterattack on such a massive scale would become a hallmark of the Soviet resistance to the German invasion.

By the winter of 1941, it was this increasingly complex and capable defiance by Soviet forces that "did as much to stop the Germans as did bad weather and poor supply lines" outside Moscow.[23] Lessons learned in the winter of 1941 defense and counter-offensive drove massive changes in the Red Army through 1942. Relearning the power of maneuver and combined arms, the Soviets implemented the use of infantry "shock groups" supported by assault guns, artillery, engineers, and dedicated close air support to create "overwhelming superiority of forces to achieve ... penetrations at specific points."[24] To exploit success, new, more flexible armored formations of cheap but reliable tanks were forged and tested in the bloody battles of 1942 into 1943. All of these advances were supported by elaborate tactical to strategic-level deception efforts, known as *maskirovka*, as well as a renewed investment in partisan formations to stalk and harass German rear areas.

This "key ... rebirth in Soviet tactical skill" would be on full display in the streets of Stalingrad and, more importantly, the massive counteroffensive that would eventually destroy the German 6th Army and tip the decisive point of World War II.[25] At the micro-tactical level, Soviet platoons employed combined arms including grenades, flamethrowers, machine guns, and machine pistols to ruthlessly contest the urban terrain of Stalingrad. At the operational and strategic levels, Red Army forces carefully husbanded and masked their reserves while conducting reconnaissance to identify weak points in the Axis front. On 19 November 1942, Gen Eremenko's Stalingrad Front, Gen Rokossovsky's Don Front, and Gen Vatutin's Southwestern front unleashed their combined arms shock groups on the Germans and their Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian allies. The resulting armored exploitation completely encircled 6th Army by the 23d of November. From the humiliating defeats of Summer 1941, the Soviets had now effectively penetrated a German front through its operational depth, expanded this penetration, defeated its reserve, and logistically sustained the exploitation forces.[26] Furthermore, Soviet junior commanders showed an increasing level of initiative and skill, effectively bridging tactical opportunities into operational gains. Battalion-level reconnaissance-in-force, often spearheaded by small specifically task-organized units and carried out with no tell-tale artillery preparation, became critical in seizing and exploiting bridgeheads. The use of multiple thrusts and a ready reserve allowed the rapid penetration of gaps before German units could effectively counterattack.[27]

From 1943 through the end of the war, the Red Army continued to gain momentum. Strategic and operational deception reached new heights with specialized deception units that included loudspeakers, fake tanks, radio battalion stations (to create false radio chatter), and entire regiments of deception troops.[28] These measures helped ensure the surprise and success of *Operation Bagration*, a massive combined arms Soviet offensive that destroyed German Army Group Center, the largest German formation of the war, and handed Nazi Germany its "most calamitous defeat ... in World War II."[29]

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Even the dominance of the much-vaunted German "Big Cats," the PZKW V Panther, PZKW VI Tiger, and Tiger *Ausf.* B, was coming to an end. Though German forces are often associated with the use of assault guns,[30] Soviet ISU-152 and ISU-122 assault guns (named for the millimeter bore size of their guns), along with the IS-2 heavy tank and its 122mm gun, proved instrumental in breaking the back of German armor. Soviet forces could develop tactical situations with cheaper and faster T-34 tanks, while the heavy assault guns and IS tanks laid in wait for German armor to unmask. To deal with the eternal problem of the infantry's inability to keep up with armored penetrations, the Soviets developed *tankodesantniki*—soldiers that rode on the tanks to provide infantry support to breakthroughs and close in protection to armored formations.

The lessons Marine maneuverists can derive from studying the Russian experi-

ence in World War II go beyond the terrestrial campaigns of the Eastern Front. Around the Arctic Circle, Soviet naval infantry (Marines) adopted the use of maritime raiding, naval gunfire support, mountain warfare, and amphibious assaults to combat German Gebirgsjäger (mountain infantry) in the fjords of Finland and the northern USSR.[31] At the battle of Liinakhamari, Soviet marines combined a surprise overland attack and a contested naval landing to seize the small port of Liinakhamari. Five high speed torpedo boats generated smoke screens, landed troops via bow-ramps, and provided close-in fire support to the assault force, allowing the Marines to close with German forces and seize the port.[32] Unlike most campaigns on the Eastern Front, the fighting around the waterways of Finland centered on light infantry maritime combat in terrain ranging from rocky seashores to ice-capped mountains.[33] Certainly, there are lessons to be learned here for a Marine Corps looking to reinvigorate naval Integration in treacherous littorals banded by forbidding terrain. Another point worth studying for maneuverists: In a major divergence from their German adversary, Soviet forces integrated females in combat roles across their armed forces. From flying fighters, to driving tanks, sniping, and duties as infantry soldiers, approximately 120,000 women served in combat roles (not counting air defense units) out of the 800,000 total who served in the Red Army.[34] The experiences of these women are an unparalleled receptacle of knowledge entirely absent from the ranks of the *Wehrmacht*.

Most pressing for Marine maneuverists today, the experience of the Red Army in World War II echoes through the Cold War and into contemporary affairs. Far from just resting on their laurels, the post-World War II Soviets sought to learn from their massive successes and massive failures. Despite a tendency by Western nations to "belittle the quality of ... Soviet ... military education," the professional armed forces academies of the USSR became powerhouses of military intellectualism.[35] For example, the Frunze Academy (roughly equivalent to our Command and Staff College) boasted a three-year curriculum, ruthless entrance exams, and mandated the publishing of a thesis by each graduate. The instructor cadres of Soviet military schools were manned by rising general officers who held "advanced degrees in military science and related subjects."[36] Even lieutenants were expected to study their profession for "three hours a day, every day" in order to be competitive for promotion and acceptance to career-level courses.[37] Professional military education schools produced far more attrition than equivalent American institutions and certain billets in the Red Army could only be filled by the graduates of certain higher staff academies. Thus, Soviet officers had impetus to think, study, and write about their profession. This ensured the capture and analysis of World War II's lessons as well as the lessons of all future conflicts and military affairs.

The culture of military education in Russia codified the lessons learned from the Soviet Union's (and eventually Russian Federation's) military entanglements from the end of World War II to the present day. For example, the lessons of the botched Soviet war in Afghanistan produced *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*. This book of educational combat vignettes and commentary from the Russo-Afghan war was written by officers at the Frunze academy and translations were studied closely by U.S. forces headed to fight the Taliban Insurgency after the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan.[38] The ties of international communism meant that Soviet military scholars could easily study the performance of the forces fighting in the Korean War, Vietnam, and East Africa. The Russians also learned from their own more recent wars in Chechnya and Georgia.[39] The education garnered from all of these conflicts dating back to World War II is evident in today's Russian Military.

Like their T-34 and IS-2-driving forebears in World War II, modern Russian forces in Ukraine use aging T-72 tanks in tandem with modern T-90s to expose and destroy enemy armor and positions. Instead of the massive, combined arms armies that swept into Germany in 1945, the Russian army has decentralized combined arms down to battalion tactical groups. These formations are task organized with their own internal maneuver, fires, electronic warfare, unmanned aerial systems, and reconnaissance capabilities. It is likely no coincidence that battalion tactical groups bear a striking resemblance to World War II German *Kampfgruppen* ("battle groups") or even modern Marine Corps battalion landing teams. The Russian military since the 1990s has also gone to great lengths to professionalize these formations with a renewed emphasis on career non-commissioned officers to augment the old conscript system. Russian deception and fires have also evolved; their wake through history is easy to see. The echoes of the Soviet Maskirovka efforts that baffled and misled the Wehrmacht resound through the aggressive electronic warfare barrages, social media disinformation campaigns, and "Little Green Men" who rapidly overcame Ukrainian forces in 2014. The massed artillery and rocket fires that devastated Ukrainian formations may have been orchestrated through drone observation and signals intelligence, but the tactic is essentially the same as when it was utilized by Soviet shock groups against Army Group Center in 1944. Furthermore, the myriad of Russian-backed militias, private military corporations, and gangs currently plaguing Ukrainian forces in the Donbas can almost certainly trace their origins through Communist Cold War

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guerrillas back to the Red Army-supported partisans, who tied up massive German resources across the steppes of the USSR.

As the author Marinus argues in the *Marine Corps Gazette* article "Learning from the Germans Part II: The Future," the study of German military history, particularly the history of World War II, is indispensable to the study of maneuver warfare. However, this study should be pursued with a mindfulness toward the historiography and bias inherent in our own institutional orientation towards the Germans. To gain the full story, maneuverists must also study Nazi Germany's ultimate foe and the one most responsible for her destruction: the USSR. To discard the Soviet perspective is to discard clarity in favor of the comfort that comes with the well-trodden ground of blitzkrieg, panzers, *fingerspitzengefühl*, and *aufstragstaktik*. To discard the Soviet perspective due to the horrific atrocities and crimes committed by the Red Army while shamelessly indulging in the combat lessons of the *SS* and *Wehrmacht* is to commit hypocrisy. Moreover, the Marine Corps' next fight is far more likely to be against an adversary who harkens his military tradition back to the distinctly Eastern Red Army rather than the comfortably Western *Wehrmacht* archetype.

Marines often espouse the Germans as the masters of maneuver warfare. Boyd said that one of the key components of maneuver warfare is the need to "constantly update mental models for problem solving," tearing apart new and old models and combining the relevant components into novel solutions to defeat a unique adversary. Russian military history, with its phases of progress, implementation, analysis, and evolution, is a striking model of this crucial creative cycle. In order to truly practice our doctrine, Marines must dismantle their biases and face the uncomfortable possibility that perhaps the true masters of maneuver warfare have been hiding in plain sight all along.

Notes

1. Conversations with Marines conducted from July 2020 through December 2020

2. Marinus, "Learning from the Germans: Part II," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: January 2021).

3. Hans Ulrich Rudel, *Stuka Pilot*, (London: Black House Publishing Ltd, 2016).

4. Omer Bartov, "Preface: Professional Soldiers," in *The German Army and Genocide*, ed. Hamburg Institute for Social Research, (New York, NY: The New Press, 1999).

5. Ibid.

6. Katie Shepherd, "'Vile and Disturbing': Army Unit Marks Battle of the Bulge with Picture of Nazi War Criminal who Massacred Americans," *Washington Post*, (December 2019), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com.

7. Ian T. Brown, *A New Conception of War*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2018).

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Marinus, "Learning from the Germans," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: December, 2020).

11. Robert R. Leonhard, "Maneuver Warfare and the United States Army," In *Maneuver Warfare An Anthology*, ed. Richard D. Hooker Jr., (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993).

12. Akram Sharipov, *General Chernyakhovsky*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980).

13. David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed*, (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2015), Xi.

14. Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's General*, (London: Icon Books Ltd, 2012).

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. *Titans*.

18. *Stalin's General*.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Dr. Boris Sokolov, *Marshal K. K. Rokossovsky*, (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2015).

22. *Titans*.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *Armageddon in Stalingrad*, (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2009).

27. David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *Endgame at Stalingrad*, (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2014).

28. Lieutenant Colonel Richard N. Armstrong, *Soviet Operational Deception: The Red Cloak*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1989).

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31. David Greentree, *Gebirgsjäger versus Soviet Sailor*, (Oxford: Osprey Military, 2018).

32. Ibid.

33. Viktor Leonov, *Blood on the Shores*, (New York, NY: Ivy Books, 1993).

34. Reina Penington, "Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War," *Journal of Military History*, (Lexington, VA: Society for Military History, July 2010.

35. Martin Van Creveld, *The Training of Officers*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1990).

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Testimony of the author's own instructors at The Basic School and Infantry Officers Course.

39. Timothy L. Thomas, "Russian Tactical Lessons Learned Fighting Chechen Separatists," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, (Milton Park: Routledge, January 2007).

40. Mark Galeoti, *The Modern Russian Army 1992–2016*, (Oxford: Osprey Military, 2017).

41. *New Conception*.