MILITARY SCIENCE AND MILITARY ART IN THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

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The Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 will always remain one of the most tragic and vivid pages in our country’s history. The Soviet people and its armed forces suffered much adversities and hardships. But the country held out, and its hard and fierce struggle with the Nazi invader war crowned with our complete victory. Much credit for it goes to military science that reflected contemporary military-theoretical views, and military art, the field of practical implementation of these views with regard to preparation for and conduct of warfare.

Soviet military thought of the 1930s on the whole correctly characterized the impending war as going to be prolonged and requiring all of the country’s energies, coordinated employment of the different services of the armed forces and modes of operation. There were, however, big errors in the strategic planning with regard to forecasting conditions of the initial period of war. The planners expected that, as in the past, in the early stage there will be engagements involving cover units in border areas whereas the main forces would join fighting not earlier than 10 or 15 days after. At the same time they did not take into account the fact that the German army was already mobilized and could go into a surprise attack with its main forces passing over to the offensive.

They clearly underestimated and did not study enough questions of defense on the operational-strategic scale. Defense was regarded as short-duration actions to repel enemy invasion to be followed by rapidly going on the offensive and taking war to the enemy territory. No account was taken of the fact that fighting the superior aggressor forces would necessitate a number of intense and prolonged defense operations. The poor preparation of troops for defense had to be later paid for in terms of heavy losses.

Generally speaking, there are rather many reasons for the Red Army’s setbacks in 1941. But the most important of them all was that our troops were on the peacetime status by the outbreak of the war. They were not put in combat readiness and did not take up
designated defensive positions. Therefore the enemy, thoroughly prepared for offensive, struck at the troops (forces) that were in effect in an unarmed state, not ready for combat. It is impossible to put an army in a more terrible and unfavorable position. Had there been no other errors (untimely mobilization, excessive dispersal of forces and assets, the wrong forecast of the direction of the enemy’s main attack), this circumstance alone would have nullified all the other efforts of the troops. It entailed catastrophic consequences and predetermined all of our setbacks and defeats in the early period of war.

Why did that happen? The situation shortly before the war was crying for urgent and concealed deployment of the armed forces and preparing them for turning back the aggressor. In the first half of 1941, the people’s commissar for defense and the chief of the General Staff addressed to Stalin corresponding proposals that were, however, not accepted proceeding from, as they said at the time, higher political considerations. Attempts by the commanders of military districts to deploy at least a fraction of the forces were cut short. It is also true that initiative of the commanding personnel had been undermined by the cruel repressions of the late 1930s.

Much has been written in recent years about timely intelligence reports to Stalin about Hitler’s possible invasion of our country. This is true in principle. It is equally true that there existed information of the opposite nature. Furthermore, intelligence implies not only the procurement of information on the adversary but also its in-depth analysis, the ability to draw correct conclusions. In the meantime, reporting to Stalin the main data on aggression being prepared against the USSR, GRU [Main Intelligence Directorate] Chief F. Golikov concluded that all was false information. Consequently, things were much more complicated. Even when war finally broke out, Stalin had no clear-cut assessment of the situation. Hence the indecisive actions and belated assignment of missions to troops.

He transmitted his directive putting the border military districts in combat readiness at 00.30 on June 22, 1941. The armies received it at 3 or 4 a.m., after the start of hostilities. What is more, it was coached in contradictory, cautious and vague terms. The General Staff at first came up with a more definite directive putting the troops on combat alert to beat back the enemy aggression. But Stalin thought (hours before the start of the war!) it premature while still hoping for a peaceful settlement. The missions assigned to troops and revised by Stalin were: “1. A sudden invasion by Germans is possible during the course of 22-23 June, 1941 along the fronts of the Leningrad Military District, Baltic Military District, Western Military District, Kiev Special Military District, and Odessa Military District. The invasion can begin with provocative actions. 2. The task of our troops is to resist all provocative actions that can cause major complications. At the same time the troops … should be in full combat readiness to meet a possible sudden strike of the Germans or their allies.”

Thus, the mission assigned to the troops was not defense and resolute actions. The attention was focused on resisting provocations. Even the commanders and staffs of the military districts could not quite understand what they were supposed to do and how to act. R.Ya. Malinovsky recalled that the answer to the question on whether it was possible to open fire should the enemy intrude into our territory was: Do not yield to provocation and do not open fire.
Right from the outbreak of the war, the German army got the opportunity to seize strategic initiative. The massive employment of forces and fires along the main axes of advance made it possible for the army to penetrate into the USSR territory between 110 km and 150 km, create the threat of encirclement for major groups of our forces and disruption of the defensive frontage. As for the Soviet Armed Forces High Command, it continued to issue unrealistic instructions not knowing the true situation at the front.

In the morning of June 22, the Chief Military Council forwarded to the fronts Directive No. 2 demanding that “all forces and fires be used to hit hard at the enemy forces and destroy them in the areas where they violated the Soviet border. The ground forces should not cross the border pending a special order.” By the end of the same day the fronts were in effect assigned offensive missions—to deliver powerful counterstrikes, destroy dispositions of enemy forces and gain control of the Suwalki area (by the Northeastern and Western Fronts), and the Lublin area (by the Southwestern Front).

Second echelons and arriving reserves were, as a rule, used for spoiling attacks and counterattacks, although it would have been wiser for them in a number of instances to take up advantageous positions and turn back the enemy attack by fire. Spoiling attacks by mechanized corps and other combined units make it possible to hold up along some sections of the front and even seriously inflict heavy losses on the Nazi troops, especially along one section of the Southwestern Front. But these counterattacks were poorly prepared and had no reliable artillery and air support, and thus were not very effective.

On the whole, the defensive operations by the Fronts during the initial 15 or 18 days ended in a serious setback. The Nazi troops broke through to a depth of 450 km in the northwestern sector, 450-600 km, in the western sector and up to 350 km in the southwestern sector. The situation gradually brought the Soviet Supreme High Command to the realization of the need for a complete rethink of the earlier conduct of war plan and the passing over to the strategic defensive. There, however, were no strategic defense operations planned in advance. Everything had to be figured out straight off under pressure of the changing situation.

Despite the extraordinary situation most local leaders never flinched. The organs of top military administration, commanding generals and commanders, staffs and their entire personnel were rather quickly gaining experience and military proficiency during the course of the difficult combat operations. As a result, 1941 ended in the defeat of Nazi forces outside Moscow.

The country and its Armed Forces had to take many more major setbacks during the following year. When in March 1942 the Supreme High Command Headquarters discussed plans for the summer campaign it was decided, despite the proposal from B.M. Shaposhnikov and G.K. Zhukov to regard strategic defense as the principal mode of operation, to undertake a number of offensive operations in the Crimea, near Kharkov, in the Lgov and Smolensk sectors, in the area of Leningrad and Demyansk. Furthermore, Stalin believed that the German command’s principal objective was to take Moscow using a deep turning movement in the south. In actual fact, according to Hitler’s directive No. 1 of April 5, 1942, the main objective of the German summer offensive was to deny the USSR the most important resources by disrupting the lines of transportation, taking control of the Donbas and oil of the Caucasus.
Fresh errors made by our command determining the direction of German main attack, inconsistency and indecisiveness in selecting the mode of operation led to excessive dispersal of men and equipment. The army ended up unprepared for either the defensive or offensive. The troops ended up in an uncertain position as in 1941. The ideologized cult of the doctrine of the offensive continued to weigh down, the conduct of defense remained to be regarded as something unworthy of the Red Army. The result of the errors made by the Supreme High Command, General Staff and the commanders of the fronts in the south was the defeat near Kharkov and the painful retreat in 1942.

Subsequently, however, it became possible not only to bring the enemy to a halt at the approaches to the Volga but also to carry out the outstanding Stalingrad offensive operation resulting in the encirclement and destruction of a major Nazi disposition of forces. First of all, one should point out the apt choice by the Hq SHC and the General Staff of the moment for launching the counteroffensive when the enemy advance was on the wane, dispositions of its forces became stretched out, the flanks weakened and the going over to the defensive was not effected. The directions of main attack and the most vulnerable spots were determined rather well.

During the defensive battles it proved possible to prepare, concentrate and retain major reserves, achieve a massive employment of forces and fires in the sectors selected for counteroffensive, make a thorough use of an artillery and air offensive. Careful planning of operations was carried out for the first time during the war, and all the necessary painstaking work was conducted with commanders of all ranks on location to prepare them for combat operations, organization of cooperation, combat, logistic and technical support.

Some German and some of our researchers for that matter contend that German military art was allegedly exceptionally creative. In reality, we can see in the Battle of Kursk, in the fourth year of World War II, degradation rather than the flowering of this art, and clear signs of a stereotyped and unimaginative approach. The operations of Nazi forces were based on roughly the same principles as early on in the war, although the conditions now were different. Despite the well organized defense disposed in depth of the Soviet troops, the main German forces were assigned to the first echelon, their combined panzer units were not designed for exploitation of success but rather for penetration of the enemy defenses, and the reserves were rather scarce.

The heavy defeats were not lost upon the Soviet command. It learned the lessons in full. Learning by bitter experience Stalin came to heed more what members of the Hq SHC, General Staff and commanders of the fronts had to propose. Unlike in 1941-1942, intelligence operated much better as it timely discovered the German command’s plan to concentrate in the Kursk sector its main forces and the dates of the launching the German offensive. Based on the good knowledge of the state and the anticipation of possible changes in the situation, appropriate strategic and operational decisions were made.

The Soviet command’s plan was briefly as follows. The Central, Voronezh and part of the Steppe Fronts were to go on a deliberate strategic defensive, turn back the summer offensive of the Nazi troops, wear them down by attrition, mount a counteroffensive and destroy their main disposition of forces. Thus, the Soviet command planned and implemented a clearly defined strategic defensive operation involving several fronts under the general supervision of the Hq SHC and its representatives at the fronts (G.K. Zhukov, at the Central Front; A.M. Vasilevsky, at the Voronezh Front).
This plan of the Kursk operation and defense organization included many fundamentally new provisions that enriched military science and military art.

First, for the first time during the war Soviet strategic thought broke out of the ideological shackles of biased and negative attitude to strategic defense.

Second, the Soviet troops were not going over to the defensive owing to the lack of resources as they were supposed to in line with the prevailing theoretical views. It is believed until now that half or one third of the forces was enough to repel the offensive. This proposition was not confirmed during WWII. There was not a single successful defensive operation carried out with considerably fewer forces than the advancing enemy used.

Third, the organization of Kursk defense is an unsurpassed example of organization of defense and of the use of rational modes of operation. The depth of defense generally was 150-190 km whereas the depth of the Steppe Front varied between 250 km and 300 km. The entire defense was based on its ability to repulse massive attacks of the enemy meaning that defense was primarily antiarmor. Much attention was also paid to air defense.

Fourth, the defense was exceptionally active and mobile. This found expression in the massive strikes at enemy airfields and troops prior to the start of the enemy’s offensive. A big part was played by artillery counterpreparation fire in sectors of expected enemy operations. Second echelons and reserves, including tank armies and corps, were used to launch counterattacks and counterstrikes at enemy armor dispositions of forces that broke through.

Launching its offensive near Kursk on July 5, the Hitlerite army failed to break through our defense and only broke into its tactical zone. The mission to disrupt the offensive, which took several months in 1941-1942 to fulfill, was in the given case fulfilled without abandoning the occupied position in just six or seven days. The final collapse of Operation Citadel was predetermined not only by the efficient defensive actions but also by the offensive launched on July 12 by the troops of the Western and Bryansk Fronts along the Orel axis and the troops of the Steppe and Southwestern Fronts along the Belgorod-Kharkov axis. After the Battle of Kursk and until the end of the war, the Nazi troops could not any longer undertake a single major operational-strategic scale offensive.

They often say that early on in the war the Red Army held a vast superiority in the number of tanks, artillery pieces and planes over the enemy. This is formally so. During the first days of war, however, the greater part of the equipment was lost, and all 1941-1942 operations had to be conducted with a different relative strength in men and equipment. The German troops enjoyed appreciable superiority, especially in armor and artillery.

From the point of view of military art, the German command’s forte was the ability to flexibly maneuver men and equipment both in the offensive and defense, to rapidly shift efforts from one sector to another, and carry out good cooperation between ground troops and aviation. The surprise and swift offensive operations of 1941 accompanied by the encirclement of big dispositions of our forces, the effective attacks against the flank and rear services of the Soviet troops that mounted an offensive on Kharkov in May 1942, the routing by Manstein of superior forces of our troops in the
Crimea, among some other operations, however unpleasant for us, are the finest examples of military art.

The German command was less flexible and skillful in 1944-1945 operations albeit in a number of cases it found effective ways to oppose our advancing troops. In the closing stage of the Great Patriotic War, the Nazi army finally went over to a tough strategic defensive.

Whereas the Red Army’s strategic offensive operations were held only sequentially during the previous stages of war, its grown possibilities enabled it to carry our strategic operations of dispositions of frontal forces simultaneously along the entire length of the Soviet-German front. Such operations were carried out along a front of between 400 km and 1,100 km in width and more than 500 km or 600 km in depth. They had more resolute objectives with regard to both the depth of advance and the destruction of big enemy dispositions of forces. Also characteristic of the 1944-1945 offensive operations was a bolder and more resolute concentration of men and equipment along the axes of main thrusts. Concentrated along these axes, which accounted roughly for one third of the front’s length, were usually up to 50 percent of the personnel, 60 to 65 percent of the artillery and armor, the greater proportion of the aircraft. A high density of forces and fires was also created. The concealed massing of men and equipment during the third and concluding period of war guaranteed a tremendous power of the first strike and rapid exploitation of offensive success in depth and toward the flanks.

The principal forms of strategic offensive operations were operations groups of fronts. All in all, during the war, there were 37 strategic offensive operations with 30 of them carried out by groups of fronts. These operations involved between two and five large strategic formations of fronts, combined units of long-range aviation, national air defense forces and, in coastal sectors, forces of the fleets. Operations involving several fronts directed by the Hq SHC made it possible to pool efforts in tackling major strategic missions and make a more rational use of the available personnel and equipment.

The Hq SHC, General Staff, commanding generals and staffs of the fronts came to pay closer attention to careful reconnaissance, concealed preparations for offensive operations and dissemination of false information to the enemy. The activities to delude the enemy with regard to the direction of main thrusts were remarkable for their great scope and persuasiveness. The 1944-1945 operations taught the troops the art of swift destruction of defending enemy. Not infrequently, it proved possible, as early as during the first day of the offensive, to break through its main defense zone to its entire tactical depth in some instances. Tank corps and armies had the decisive part to play in exploiting success. During the third period of war, each front in the main sectors of advance received from the Hq SHC reserve two or even three tank armies.

The Vistula-Oder Operation by the First Belorussian and First Ukrainian Fronts in January and early February 1945 is most indicative of the grown level of military art. The Warsaw-Poznan Operation by the First Belorussian Front commanded by Marshal of the Soviet Union G.K. Zhukov was central to it. His field generalship ability became revealed in the most striking manner during the course of this operation. The front’s troops on approval from the Hq SHC rejected an ill-considered plan to march quickly toward Berlin and instead captured a staging area on the Order creating favorable conditions for a further offensive operation.
All in all there were 50 strategic operations, more than 250 operations mounted by fronts and about 1,000 army operations during the war with more than 70 percent of them being offensive. Each of them was remarkable for ingenuity, new modes of action that, as a rule, proved unexpected to the enemy.

Scientific elaboration and practical employment of new methods of warfare, innovative solutions to many problems of military art resulted from the creative approach of members of the Hq SHC, General Staff, commanders of branches of the combat arms and branches of services of the Armed Forces, commanding generals, commanders and staffs of the fronts, armies, combined units, units and subunits. But it would be wrong to say all this was being done without the knowledge of Stalin and even despite his will. No important decision was made without his knowledge and leave. The atmosphere of war dictated a highly responsible attitude to military theory. Attempts to ignore the past experience and theoretical recommendations based on it resulted in setbacks at the front. Remarkable are the specificity and demonstrability of the then military-scientific studies, their being strictly subordinated to the success of the war effort. The summing up and the theoretical comprehension of combat experience were inherent in practical activities of military commanders.

As a result of four years of contest between these strategic military schools of thought, the Soviet military art demonstrated its superiority and won victory over the Nazi army. The war once again confirmed that having a developed theory is not enough. A high standard of military art presupposes the existence of developed operational-strategic thinking and high organizational and volitional qualities. During the latter part of the war, every element of plan, every practical step involving operational planning— not only in strategic but also in operational-tactical echelons — were, as a rule, thoroughly considered. Care was taken to determine possible variants of operations and the necessary measures to be taken in the event of an adverse development of events. In other words, favorable conditions were created for the troops to perform their missions.

To make a more clear and specific point, let us dwell on some of the events witnessed by this writer. I could observe for myself the activities of the front commander Gen. I.D. Chernyakhovsky, the commander of the Fifth Army Gen. N.I. Krylov, the commander of the 45th Rifle Corps Gen. S.P. Poplavsky, among many other commanders. All their activities were so much in the interests of implementing operational plans, so organically blended with the most delicate specific features of the situation, and the methods of organization of combat actions were so specific and demonstrative that this entire creative and organizational process left no room for formalism, abstract discussions and theoretical rhetoric. They did only what was essential for the upcoming combat. This is also very relevant in our day and age.

Here is what Gen. Chernyakhovsky did in the 184th Rifle Division of Gen. B. Gorodovikov. Instead of hearing detailed accounts of plans, as was the usual practice before, he opted for a close study of the operations maps. He then followed with asking a few questions: Where exactly were the forward edge of forwardmost positions of the enemy, the line of lifting automatic fire during the attack, what was the calculated time for moving up tanks from the attack positions, whence counterattacks were possible and what forces and fires were available for repulsing them? Hearing the answers, Gen. Chernyakhovsky used to restate details of some of the missions in clear and concise terms. Working at the forward edge of the battle areas he demanded that he should see
the places slated for making lanes in enemy minefields and procedures of negotiating them. He checked up on the correspondence of scheduled artillery fires on the maps of the commanders of the rifle division and the artillery battalion. Detecting an error he ordered the division commander to compare the data on the maps of all commanders of the rifle and artillery units. Next he ordered to fire two rounds at one of the prepared target areas. He could see that the preparation for fire delivery was mainly accurate.

Arriving at the attack position of the close support tanks he heard a brief report from officers of the technical tank service of the front that the tanks were ready for action and then ordered a company commander and the driver of the lead tank to take him through the route of advance. Reaching the deployment line and making sure that the company commander knew his way through the friendly minefields, he proceeded to the positions of the regimental artillery group. Once again, there were no explanations or verbal accounts of how the troops were supposed to move up, change positions or carry out other missions. Everything was checked upon only practically, in deed. Liability for defects and errors was very strict. He asked the offenders to make good for a specified deadline. Repeated offenders were replaced with more energetic and experienced commanders.

Such generals as I. Chernyakhovsky, N. Krylov, P. Batov, I. Lyudnikov, S. Poplavsky and many others learned from their own experience that the most important and decisive thing in breaking through defenses is, first, painstaking reconnaissance of enemy defense and weapons systems; second, precise strikes by the artillery and aircraft against specific pinpointed targets with the objective to reliably destroy (suppress) them. Practical combat activities show that if these two leading missions (reconnaissance and delivery of fire for effect) are tackled reliably, even a “none too well organized” assault achieves successful advance of the troops and penetration of the enemy defense. This does not mean we underestimate the importance of teamwork and coordination of the infantry, tanks and the other combat arms during the course of assault and continuing the advance. Failing in the above, it is obviously impossible to build on the results of effective fire against the enemy. Also true is the fact that no harmonious or “beautiful” assault is going to overcome resistance of the enemy unless its defense has been neutralized.

Views of this matter largely determined the direction of combat training in planning for offensive operations. In some instances, as it happened, for example, at the Western Front in winter of 1943/44, the focus was on training in the deployment and movement of troops in assault whereas training in reconnaissance and delivery of fire for effect was only formal. At the same time, the Third Belorussian Front focused, along with the training of troops for actions during assault, on training commanders and staff officers, reconnaissance units, artillery and infantry observers in pinpointing enemy weapons and precise and effective employment of friendly weaponry. Strongpoints similar to those that were supposed to destroy in the depth of enemy defense were built in the rear areas of troops.

Painstaking work during the training sessions and exercises focused on pinpointing the positions of enemy weapon assets, comparing maps of enemy defenses against the reconnaissance results, methods of requests for fire, lifting and suspension of fire among many other questions of cooperation of rifle, tank, artillery and engineer units. Such training sessions and exercises were not as striking and attractive as, say, those
involving tank and infantry assaults. They appeared very tedious and even boring to some commanders but in reality they were rich in content and recreated the most complex and difficult moments of conduct of combat upon which success depended first and foremost. It took much time and painstaking effort before the commanders and reconnaissance personnel mastered to perfection the art of pinpointing and plotting on the map the positions of enemy weapon assets. Some other matters of combat organizations were as carefully studied together with commanders of all levels. All that in the final analysis made the Belorussian Operation and other operations of the second half of the war a success.

Admittedly, the mastering of military art was not easy. Not all commanders managed to quickly get the knack of specific preparatory work. Not all training sessions and exercises focused precisely on those aspects and operational methods of decisive importance for a successful offensive. Among the officers and generals newly arrived at the front were some who had no faith in the new methods of preparing for combat operations and training of troops. The methods were far too different from those they had been taught before.

Here is just one example. A deputy chief of staff of the 5th Army came on an inspection and assistance tour of the 184th Rifle Division before the forced crossing of the Neman during the course of the Belorussian Operation. A military academy teacher not long before that, he watched for a long while with bewilderment the division commander, Gen. Gorodovikov, working at the observation post with one after another regimental commander, or rather thinking things over, consulting, arguing with them before reaching concrete decisions and specifying missions and the artillery preparation procedures, crossing the river and operations on the beachhead. Gorodovikov was a rather overbearing person and he could have assigned missions in a rather categorical form. The responsibility, however, was so great that he sought direct contact with the regimental commanders in order to once again make sure if his own judgments were right and at the same time to convince his subordinates that they should do precisely this or that thing instead of issuing formal orders.

An hour, or an hour and a half later the inspecting general, whose patience was wearing thin, turned to the division commander: “Comrade Gorodovikov, I am still waiting for you to issue your operation order.” “Just let me explain to the commanders how to cross the river and take the opposite bank, and if some time is left, I will issue that order, the division commander replied. I am not going to describe the inspecting general’s reaction and explanations that followed. The war put such a distance between the two men that they, it transpired, literally spoke different languages. This small episode mirrored two different command and control eras, two entirely different approaches to performing concrete combat missions. The academician recognized solely the regulations-based monolog consisting of issuing orders and organizing cooperation. The combat-seasoned division commander’s concern was to devise better ways of communicating missions to his subordinates, having the latter form as clear idea of the missions as possible based on their certainty that he is right and his operational procedure is necessary. Every commander knew during the war that he would be judged not so much for the ability to report the plans as by the results of accomplishing the combat missions. Therefore, the outer aspects were of secondary relevance to the commander.
Unfortunately, the accumulated experience began to sink into oblivion some time after the war. When nuclear weapons appeared on the scene, they began to train for a rate of advance of 100 km per day where there was no longer any special need for careful reconnaissance or thorough preparation for combat. Military art of commanders and staffs began to degrade and boil down mainly to drafting numerous voluminous documents where specific missions and the crux of the matter is lost amid the host of abstract theoretical provisions and generalities.

It is necessary to draw conclusions from all this. The rich experience of the Great Patriotic War, likewise the experience of local wars, the operations of our commanders in Chechnya, should be addressed and taken into consideration in developing new formal documents containing regulations and methods of military training and indoctrination.

NOTES: