

THE RED AND BLUE: THE SOVIET GENERAL STAFF'S WARGAMES (1940)

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The article delves into the historically secretive realm of Soviet wargames, shedding light on two pivotal exercises conducted in 1940. These wargames, previously concealed from public knowledge, have significant implications for understanding the Soviet military strategy and the Cold War era.

By analysing archival materials and historical context, the article explores the operational-strategic doctrine of the Soviet Union, revealing insights into the military's approach to Eastern Europe.

The wargames marked a departure from traditional simulations, signalling the Soviet Union's readiness to execute both defensive and offensive operations on a continental scale. Furthermore, they laid the groundwork for subsequent military exercises during the Cold War era, shaping the course of Soviet military strategy and geopolitical considerations.

Keywords: wargames; Zhukov; Stalin; theory of war; Cold War;

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet General Staff capabilities to orchestrate and oversee extensive military campaigns in Europe played a pivotal role in shaping the Cold War-era Soviet military strategic thought pertaining to warfare on the European continent.

In the realm of Russian and Soviet military history, the tradition of conducting wargames holds significant importance. However, unlike Western countries, neither the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, nor the Russian Federation's military tradition extensively documents or publicly discusses the outcomes of these exercises or the methodologies employed. Within the Russian tradition, the insights and strategies of the General Staff are held in high regard and often treated as sacrosanct knowledge. The Kremlin typically keeps such knowledge concealed from the public eye. Nevertheless, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians managed to shed light on two of the most secretive Soviet wargames conducted in 1940. It was made feasible by the opening of Soviet archives to both Western and Russian historians during the 1990s. Certain authors referenced in this discourse undertook thorough analyses of primary Russian sources pertaining to these exercises, as found within archival materials.

The objective of the article is to explore the operational-strategic doctrine of the Soviet Union, analysing the strategic possibilities available to the Soviet military command within the Eastern European theatre of war. Moreover, it seeks to trace the evolution of Soviet military-strategic thought, particularly in regard to the conduct of wargames, reaching a new historical threshold. The mentioned wargames differed from mere simulations conducted by generals aiming to integrate the experiences of the Civil War into future warfare theory. Instead, they demonstrated the Soviet Union's readiness to execute both defensive and offensive operations on a new strategic scale, spanning the entire spectrum of potential conflicts from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. The wargames marked the first instances of Soviet military exercises conducted at a continental level, prompting Soviet generals to contemplate strategies on a grand scale. For instance, they included simulations and military plans devised by the Warsaw Pact, such as the 1964 Soviet Plan (PHP, 2000, p. 2) for the invasion of the Western Europe.

The wargames laid the groundwork for subsequent military exercises conducted in the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. They elucidate the Soviet military's approach to Eastern Europe as a "*pred-polye*" ("*pre-field*" or "*foreground*") zone, which, in military terminology, signifies strategic depth. In essence, the wargames designated the regions encompassing the Baltic States, Eastern Poland (including Lwow), as well as territories in Western Ukraine and Belarus, as areas of potential conflict and contention.

From a historical and geopolitical standpoint, the exercises shed light on Soviet military thought regarding the European continent in the event of conflict during the Cold War era. Furthermore, they offer insights into contemporary Eastern Europe, where Russia once again poses a security threat to neighbouring states such as the Baltic States and Poland. Paradoxically, if the Soviets conducted the wargames at the end of December 1940, the Germans just a couple of weeks ago finished "*Barbarossa Wargames*", the simulation of the invasion of the Soviet Union. Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler personally followed the results of these games in their own countries. So, simultaneously, two dictators and their military leaders were deeply immersed in theoretical studies and preparations for a major conflict in the "*pred-polye*" regions. Strikingly, simultaneously the same preparations were arranged by the Americans in the spring of 1940-1941 known as the "*Louisiana Maneuvers*".

Furthermore, the strategic significance of these wargames extends to Western military command and leadership, as both offensive and defensive operations were extensively simulated on Polish territory. Given the present circumstances, it is highly probable that the Russian General Staff is well aware of these games. In the event of conflict spilling over from regions such as Ukraine, Belarus, and other strategically vital areas in Eastern Europe, the insights gained from these two wargames, combined with lessons from the Second World War and Soviet Cold War doctrines, will hold practical importance for Russian military leadership.

For the Soviet military command and the Stavka, particularly under Stalin's leadership, these wargames represented a seminal strategic and theoretical experience that profoundly influenced Soviet military and political thought post-1945, marking the onset of the Cold War era. The Western or European theatre of war emerged as the primary focus for potential conflict with the West throughout the entire Cold War period. These wargames played a crucial role in shaping the teleological preparation for the heightened scale of military strategy required during the Cold War.

For instance, General Lieutenant A. Vladimirskiy, in his 1964 article "*Once More on the Modern Concept and Classification of Theatres of Military Operations*", outlined the Soviet Command's perspective on theatres of war. Vladimirskiy identified seven theatres, with primary emphasis placed on the European (Western) Theatre of Military Operations. This theatre encompassed all European countries up to the Ural Mountains, Northern Africa, and the western portion of Asia Minor. The naval component extended from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. Within this theatre, Vladimirskiy delineated various strategic "*axes*", including European territories north of a line passing through Kiev, the Carpathians, the Alps, Toulouse, Madrid, and Cadiz. However, he underscored the utmost importance of regions such as Scandinavia, the Baltic straits zone, Central Europe, and the British Isles ("*Military Thought*", No. 2/1965; 3/1964). Consequently, these wargames served as a platform for the Soviets to develop proficiency in conducting military operations on a pan-European scale.

THE SOVIET WARGAMES ON THE EVE OF 1941

Six months prior to the outbreak of the war in 1941, the Soviet Union conducted two significant operational-strategic map-based exercises, involving the highest Command Staff of the Red Army, held at the General Staff of the Red Army. The main hero of the wargames, Marshal of the Soviet Union G.K. Zhukov, argued that: "*The military-strategic game mainly aimed to test the reality and expediency of the main provisions of the coverage plan and the actions of the troops in the initial period of the war.*" (Жуков/Zhukov, 1986, p. 239).

It should be noted that the General Staff regularly conducted military-strategic wargames. For instance, from April 19th to April 25th 1936, wargames were organized. The primary focus of the hypothetical conflict was the area along the Belarusian-Polish border. There was even consideration given to the possibility of engaging in a major battle against a potential Western adversary within Belarusian territory. Actions in the Ukrainian and Baltic war theatres were deemed secondary in importance during these exercises (Закхаров/Zakharov, 1989, p. 93).

In the Belarusian theatres the "*Red*" concentrated 1250 aircraft and five armies. The Soviet General Staff paid a lot of time and effort to this wargame and, according to Chief of the General Staff (1960-63) Matvey Zakharov, many calculations that were analysed during the game were predicted when the real war started. But some egregious errors were made due to approaches that relied on the old premises which were built during the First World War and the Civil War. The number of forces

was more or less equal, the main forces of the “Red” already were deployed to the border; the command had not anticipated that the “Blue” might faster deploy forces to the border and make the first attack. Moreover, the factor of surprise attack had not been examined. Despite objective old assumptions, the wargame triggered the process of reflection and modification of many retrograde theoretical assumptions. In 1937, the General Staff initiated a new wargame “*Army offensive operation in the initial period of the war*” which tried to tackle many theoretical problems which emerged in 1936.

In Soviet historiography, the subject of wargames conducted before the German invasion of the USSR was tightly controlled by Soviet propaganda, and Soviet historians had only a partial understanding of these exercises. Comprehensive research on this topic only began to emerge in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even when some authors in the Soviet Union wrote about this topic, the information was carefully integrated into the Soviet narrative of the country’s and army’s defensive preparedness for a potential war, while concealing the offensive nature of the exercises (Бобылёв/Bewitelyov, 1995, No. 5).

It was an established Soviet tradition to conduct the most significant military wargames and discussions in the final days of the year. Between 23 and 31 December 1940, such activities were particularly crucial. At that time, the wargames and meetings took on added importance due to the recent conclusion of the Soviet-Finnish War in March 1940 and the onset of the Second World War with the occupation of Poland and France. Additionally, the impact of the blitzkrieg tactics employed by the German Armed Forces in Poland and France was keenly felt during the wargames. The Soviet generals were deeply impressed by the rapid and decisive nature of these German attacks in both countries.

In his 1986 version of “*Memories and Recollections*”, Zhukov recounted that, at the end of September 1940, he received a message from the General Staff indicating that a meeting of the highest command staff of the army would be held in Moscow in December, directed by the Central Committee of the party. He was assigned the task of delivering a report on the topic “*Characteristics of a Modern Offensive Operation*” for the planned large-scale operational-strategic games, where he was to represent the “blue” side. Zhukov recalled in his memoirs that every general was aware that they were preparing for a potential conflict “*against the strongest army of the West*”. According to Zhukov’s recollections, Stalin invited him and Timoshenko to his office to discuss the upcoming wargames. Zhukov acknowledged that the games held significant dramatic and symbolic meaning

for the Soviet leadership, as they revealed all the concerns he had, which later became tragically apparent in June 1941. Following the conclusion of the games, Stalin summoned the generals to the Kremlin. He expressed disappointment at the news of the “Red” side’s defeat and added: “*Let us not forget that in war, it is not just about numerical superiority, but also about the art of commanders and troops*”. (Жуков/Zhukov, ib., p. 240). To Pavlov’s defence speech during the meeting, Stalin stated that “*The commander of the military district must possess the art of war, capable of making the right decisions in any circumstances*” (ib., p. 241). According to Stalin, the victory in the future war will be on the side of those who possess more tanks and higher motorization of troops (ib., p. 242). Such philosophical confession was possible from Stalin quite often. For example, on 14 April 1940, he delivered a speech in front of the General Staff and lamented that the Red Army lack of agility and manoeuvrability were not properly adopted to the changing warfare in Finland. He added: “*This was the main factor preventing our troops from quickly adapting to the primary conditions of the war in Finland. They failed to understand that it was not just a military walkover but a real war. The mentality that our army is invincible, coupled with the boasting, which is rampant among us – and the most ignorant people are usually the biggest boosters – must end. We need to permanently get rid of this boasting. Our people need to be drilled with the understanding that no army is invincible. We should remind them of Lenin’s words: armies that have been defeated or have suffered losses often fight very well afterward. Our people, from the command staff to the regular soldiers, must understand that war is a game with some unknowns, where defeats can happen. Therefore, we must learn not only how to advance but also how to retreat. The most important thing to remember is Lenin’s philosophy.*

It remains unsurpassed, and it would be good if our Bolsheviks grasped this philosophy, which is fundamentally different from the naive belief that our army is invincible, has everything, and can overcome anything. We must abandon this mindset of ‘throwing our hats over the problem’ if we want our army to become a truly modern force. What prevented our army from quickly adapting and preparing for serious warfare, not just a walkover? What hindered our command staff from restructuring their approach to fight the war not in an old-fashioned but in a new way? Bear in mind that, throughout the entire existence of Soviet power, we have not yet fought a real modern war. Minor episodes in Manchuria, Lake Khasan, or Mongolia are trivial; they are not wars but isolated skirmishes in small, well-defined areas. Japan was afraid to start a war, and we did not want it either,

and the small skirmishes demonstrated that Japan failed". (Документы, 1941, год: Кн. 1, Documents: Year 1941, p. 602). From the General Staff, during the wargames, he will demand exactly this new military philosophy that would prepare the Red Army for the future warfare.

Despite the advent of Perestroika in 1986, the full version of Zhukov's memoirs was not published at that time. It was not until 2002 that the complete memoirs, including previously censored sentences from the Soviet era, were finally released. In these memoirs, Zhukov reveals details that were previously censored. Specifically, Zhukov writes about the moment during the wargames when "...our military theoretical science did not thoroughly consider the issues of strategic defence, mistakenly deeming it less important" (Жуков/Zhukov, 2002, p. 198). He regrettably confesses that the Soviet strategic thinking has not reached proper level of understanding of the modern warfare. In relation to this aspect, he writes: "The thing is, until 1940, our military-political leadership lacked a solid understanding of the significance of the methods and forms of deploying large tank and mechanized units like corps-army in modern warfare." (Ib., p. 199).

In 2005, the Russian historian Vladimir Sherstnev provided a more detailed analysis and evidence about this event in his book. According to Sherstnev, during the meeting with the commanders in the Kremlin, Stalin was displeased with the tone of the outcomes presented by the General Staff regarding the wargames. The final conclusion suggested that Soviet divisions were much stronger than the German ones. Stalin increasingly realized that the General Staff was making subjective assessments of both its own troops and the potential adversary. Sherstnev noted that, in his speech, Stalin highlighted how the war in Europe had revealed that the Germans initiated military actions with pre-mobilized and deployed forces, concentrating the full might of their tank and air forces in the initial strike. Stalin criticized the military leadership for failing to comprehend the new operational art demonstrated by the Wehrmacht in Poland and the West. By conducting operational-strategic games based on their prepared tasks, the General Staff was, in Stalin's view, improperly preparing the command of the districts and armies to repel aggression, potentially even criminally so. The Finnish war further exposed the unpreparedness for war among commanders at all levels, and Stalin lamented that the General Staff, as the "brain of the army", still lacked measures to successfully repel a sudden powerful strike and did not know how to counter the enemy's blow with the full force of the wartime army using the peacetime army.

Stalin demanded that the General Staff should urgently develop and present a new mobilization plan to the government and make adjustments to the operational plan in line with the changed military-political situation worldwide. He emphasized the need to expedite the equipment of the Air Force and troops with planes and tanks and sharply criticized the views of some individuals who underestimated motorization (Шерстнев/Sherstnev, 2005, pp. 171-173).

Finally, Stalin concludes the following: "For several years the Central Committee of the party and the government literally <imposed> on the leadership of the People's Commissariat of Defence the idea of the necessity of creating large mechanized tank formations. But the People's Commissariat of Defence showed some remarkable timidity in this regard. (...) Kulik defends a large 18,000-strong division on horse-drawn transport; he opposes the mechanization of the army. The government is pushing for the mechanization of the army, introducing engines into the army, while Kulik opposes engines. It is as if he were advocating against tractors and combines, defending the plough and the economic backwardness of the countryside. If the government had taken Kulik's point of view, say, during the years of collectivization of agriculture, we would have been left with individual farms and the plough". In the same speech, it was emphasized: "Modern warfare will be a war of engines: engines on land, engines in the air, engines on water and underwater. In these conditions, victory will belong to those who have more engines and greater reserves of power!" And he concluded his speech by stating that it is not armies that fight, but economies. The level of a military leader's art is ultimately determined by the economic resources and capabilities of the country." (Ib., p. 174).

RED ARMY'S DECEMBER 1940 COMMAND STAFF MEETING: DOCTRINAL SHIFTS IN SOVIET MILITARY DOCTRINE

In December, a meeting of the senior command staff of the Red Army was held in Moscow, which was attended by the heads of the People's Commissariat of Defence and the General Staff, heads of main departments, inspector generals of military branches, commanders, members of military councils, chiefs of staff of military districts and armies, heads of military academies, commanders of some corps and divisions, and other officials – more than 270 people in total. This representative meeting and the subsequent operational-strategic games on the maps completed the operational training of the Red Army command staff in 1940 (Бобылев П.Н, Военно-Исторический Журнал/Military-Historical Journal, 1993, p. 9).

At the first meeting the participants discussed interesting issues, namely:

1. *"The results and tasks of the combat training of the Ground Forces, the Air Force and the operational training of the highest command personnel"* (speaker, Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army, General of the Army K. A. Meretskov);
2. *"Character of the modern offensive operation"* (speaker, Commander of the Kyiv Special Military District, General of the Army G. K. Zhukov). Zhukov, in his report before the games, presented his assessment of geostrategic situation in the world and in Europe and outlined importance of the development of the cutting-edge military technologies (first of all, the tanks, artillery and aviation), which make the war faster and more fundamental than it was before. However, he outlined that only Nazi Germany had demonstrated its ability to conduct deep operations and operational art (Русский архив/Russian archive, 1993). In this address in front of the Soviet military leadership Zhukov presented his maturity as commander and his intellectual preparedness to conduct 20th-century grand-scale military operations. For example, Zhukov stressed that *"In the conditions of our Western theatre of military operations, a large-scale offensive operation with a strategic objective, it seems to me, should be conducted on a broad front, at least on a scale of 400-450 km"*. Such logic is certainly quite close to the Cold War military doctrine of the Soviet Union;
3. *"Air Force in offensive operations and in the struggle for air dominance"* (reported by Chief of the Main Directorate of the Red Army Air Force, Lieutenant General of Aviation P. V. Rychagov). Rychagov's ideas found positive response during discussions. Especially among the main tasks of aviation, he particularly emphasized the task of achieving strategic and operational air superiority (История военной стратегии России/History of Russian Military Strategy, 2000, p. 244);
4. *"The nature of a modern defensive operation"* (speaker, Commander of the Moscow Military District, General of the 4th Army, Tyulenev);
5. *"The use of mechanized formations in a modern offensive operation and the introduction of a mechanized corps into a breakthrough"* (speaker, Commander of the Western Special Military District, Colonel General of Tank Forces D.G. Pavlov);
6. *"Combat of a Rifle Division in offensive and defensive"* (Rapporteur, Inspector General of the Red Army Infantry, Lieutenant General A. K. Smirnov).

It was not coincidental that all reports had a theoretical nature; the recent geopolitical situation underscored the necessity for new military theories and a reassessment of the experiences gained by Soviet generals on the battlefields of the First World War and the Civil War. Furthermore, the meeting revealed underlying problems within the community of Soviet military intellectuals. Many of those who had developed the renowned theories of *"deep defence"* and *"deep offense"* operations had either suffered or were killed by the Soviet regime at the end of the 1930s.

During the meeting, many generals acknowledged that Soviet military schools were in a state of deep crisis and that serious studies of recent European wars experiences had not been undertaken. Interestingly, it was recognized that the experiences of Soviet officers in the wars of the 1910s and 1920s were not directly applicable to the Soviet-Finnish War and, especially, to the contemporary wars being waged by Germany in Europe. Ironically, even within such closed meetings of high command, there were individuals advocating for strict adherence to ideological postulates and cautioning against overestimating Germany's successes in Europe.

It appears that the Soviet generals were indirectly inclined to discard the last remnants of doctrinal experiences from the Civil War era and transition contemporary military thinking towards the scale and scope of modern industrial warfare characteristic of the 20th century. These wargames can be viewed as the initial strides toward a conventional, non-nuclear form of warfare akin to what would later emerge during the Cold War. Upon careful examination of these reports, it becomes evident that the generals were discussing the future of warfare. They articulated the necessary steps to modernize the Red Army and bring it in line with contemporary standards of warfare.

The generals did not directly discuss the possibility of war between Germany and the USSR, but it was implicitly acknowledged as a theoretical possibility in the statements made by the speakers. The ultimate decision reached was to address all the Armed Forces discrepancies within the next six months. Furthermore, there was a regrettable acceptance of the fact that the army was not prepared for war and that its combat readiness was deteriorating. However, the primary issue identified lay in the low qualifications of the vast majority of the command staff of the Red Army (Ib., p. 13). Nevertheless, there was unanimous agreement among the participants that the military literature and documents pertaining to the art of war must be revised and aligned with the principles of the new warfare theory.

An intriguing discussion ensued regarding the issue of air control and dominance among the Soviet generals. Two distinct groups emerged: the first group favoured the German approach of launching massive attacks on enemy airfields, while the second group believed that success in air operations primarily depended on defeating and suppressing the enemy in air battles.

Additionally, General I.V. Tyulenev, in a report on defence issues, was compelled to acknowledge: "... we do not have a modern substantiated theory of defence, which could be opposed to the modern theory and practice of a deep army offensive operation." (Ib., p. 14). He delineated the fundamental principles for preparing and executing a defensive operation, emphasizing the necessity of establishing a comprehensive defensive system within the operational framework. This system should be capable of repelling large-scale tank assaults, withstanding aerial bombardments, and safeguarding personnel and firepower from enemy artillery barrages.

Regarding the role of tanks, the Soviet generals concurred with the German perspective, deeming tanks to be pivotal for success in warfare. Sergey Bobylev, a Soviet general and historian, criticized the Soviet command for neglecting to study and analyse crucial strategic issues during such an important meeting. He highlighted the oversight in addressing topics such as strategy, strategic defence, and the initial period of war, the absence of which became apparent in the early days of conflict (Ib., p. 15). Famous Russian military thinker Gyorgy Isserson came under attack during this period, particularly due to his book *"The New Forms of Combat"*, published in 1940. The book, which analysed the German-Polish War, posited that future wars would not have an initial stage but would instead commence with all available and deployed forces. Despite Isserson's assertions, none of the Soviet generals challenged this criticism. On the contrary, the Soviet command viewed Isserson's ideas as speculative and unsubstantiated.

The first-time decision to conduct the wargames was made in October 1940. The goals of the first wargames (December) were the following (БобылевП.Н, Военно-Исторический Журнал/Military-Historical Journal, 1993, No. 7, p. 14):

1. Give practice to the high command:

- a) in organizing and planning a front-line, army operation, its combat and material support in the full depth;
- b) in the command and control of the operation, and organization and ensuring the interaction of the armed forces and combat arms and rear management;

2. To work out and master the basics of a modern offensive operation of the front and the army, in particular:

- a) organization and methods of breaking through fortified areas with overcoming barriers strongly developed in depth;
- b) forcing a large river barrier;
- c) organization and conduct of an anti-amphibious operation in order to prevent the landing of the sea and air assault forces;
- d) organizing and ensuring the release of a large airborne assault force;
- e) introduction of cavalry-mechanized groups into the breakthrough;
- f) interaction with the navy.

To the wargames in 1940-1941, the Soviet command already acted as a system, with the participation of the Minister of Defence, heads of the General Staff, their deputies, and the heads of the armies. In general, were involved 32 people plus 55 technical workers (Захаров/Zakharov, ib., p. 194). On 23 June 1941, the Main Military Council of the Red Army was abolished and the Stavka of the Supreme High Command (Stavka V GK, SV GK) was established. Stavka was an extraordinary body of supreme military command that exercised strategic leadership over the Soviet armed forces during the Great Patriotic War. Thus, something like an improvised Headquarters of the Supreme Command (Stavka) was created. During this period, wargames became a focal point for discussions between commanders and Stalin himself. Stalin held the belief that Germany's primary offensive thrust should target Ukraine rather than Belarus. It was based on Germany's perceived strategic imperative to control Ukraine, particularly the Donbas region and the Caucasus oil fields. Stalin predicted that without access to these vital regions, Germany would be unable to sustain a prolonged war effort (Ib., p. 179). This assumption came from general assessments of the geopolitical situation in Europe, Moscow considering that the southern front is a priority for Germany.

Boris Shaposhnikov, the Head of the General Staff, added to this construct the assumption that the zone from the Baltic States to the Carpathians and the Bug River must be a so-called *"pre-field or foreground"* (*"pred-polye"*) or *"zone of the fence"* with the depth up to 300 km. Above all else, these areas for the Soviet command were lost areas, hence they inevitably will be given to the enemy's control (Ib., p. 183). But Zakharov had doubts regarding Shaposhnikov's authorship of this plan.

Another significant revelation from these wargames was the strategic disadvantage faced by the Soviet Union compared to the *"Blue"*, representing Nazi Germany. According to Russian military historian Alexey Gayveronsky, the Soviets

were keenly aware of this imbalance. He refers to two notes compiled by the People's Commissar of Defence, General Timoshenko, and the Chief of the General Staff (Shaposhnikov, Meretskov, and Zhukov), on 19 August and 18 September 1940, as well as on 11 March and 15 May 1941. The notes proposed two courses of action against the Germans. One option was to deliver a decisive blow by the main forces of the Red Army to the north of Brest, aiming to crush the enemy on the Warsaw direction and open the road to Berlin. The other option was to strike powerfully towards Krakow and Breslau in the south, aiming to cut off Germany from Romanian oil supplies and *"decisively influence the Balkan countries regarding their participation in the war"*. The January manoeuvres appeared to test both options, with the *"southern"* approach ultimately taking precedence. But the notes emphasize that *"Germany keeps its army deployed and mobilized, concentrating the forces necessary for a strike against the USSR within 10-15 days"*. Meanwhile, the Soviets complete the strategic deployment on the 30th day from the start of mobilization (Гайворонский/Gayveronsky). According to Gayveronsky, exactly the 15-day advantage of the Germans in the strategic deployment played its tragic role in the war.

THE LAST PRE-WAR OPERATIONAL-STRATEGIC WARGAMES OF THE SOVIET UNION

In January 1941, the situation forced the Soviet Command to take the wargames more than simply theoretical routine, but as the projection of the real war. Escalation took an irreversible character in Europe. The second operational-strategic wargames took place from 2-6 January and 8-11 January 1941, but they differed in geographical conditions compared to the areas of Belarus or Western Ukraine. However, a significant portion of the frontline still encompassed Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldavia. In this iteration, the primary battles during the initial stages of the war were anticipated to unfold in the territories of Eastern and Central Poland. In 1965, Marshal of the Soviet Union A.M. Vasilevsky, who played a pivotal role in the inception of these planning exercises, remarked on their significance: *"In January 1941, when the proximity of the war was already felt quite distinctly, the main points of the operational plan were tested in a strategic military game with the participation of the highest command of the armed forces"*. (Белойцова З.С./Belousova Z.S., 1992, No. 6. p. 9).

The plot of the game. The *"Blue"/"Western"* team managed to deploy and concentrate the forces near the borders of the *"Red"/"Eastern"* team faster

that the *"Red"*. The Blue team created four fronts from the Baltic to the Black Sea and, on 15 July 1941, went on the offensive with two northern fronts. The main *"Western"* blow entailed two southern fronts (160 divisions) in the strip south of Brest in the direction of Vladimir-Volynsky, Tarnopol. Near Belarus were concentrated 60 divisions in the first echelon. They, without waiting for the full concentration of all forces, went over to the offensive in order to ensure the actions of neighbouring fronts in the main direction; striking from the regions of East Prussia in the direction of Riga and Dvinsk (Daugavpils), and from the regions of Suwalki and Brest-Litovsk to Baranovichi had the goal of reaching the front of Baranovichi, Dvinsk, Riga by 15 August. The offensive of the *"Western"* ground forces was supported by powerful air force. In the coastal direction, the troops interacted with the fleet.

Unable to hold back the pressure, the formations of the North-Eastern Front (Red) began to withdraw to a pre-prepared line of defence with a widely developed system of fortified areas. According to the plan, the Red, after regrouping, had to organize the counteroffensive operation. The Red managed to withstand the attacks of the Blue team in the Baltic Sea.

As Zakharov wrote, when drawing up game plans, the strategic situation was based on the expected events that could unfold on the western border in the event of an attack by fascist Germany on the Soviet Union.

The goals of the wargame were:

- 1) develop and master the basics of modern defensive and offensive operations;
- 2) give practice to the highest commanding staff in organizing and planning front-line and army operations, in command and control and organizing interaction between the main branches of the military and the Navy;
- 3) work out the following issues: defence of the state border in the event of an attack by superior enemy forces; withdraw to a prepared defensive line; conduct private operations with the aim of defeating the enemy in a frontier battle; overcome the foreground; mastery of fortified areas; break through the defensive field line of the enemy; organize the pursuit of forcing by the cavalry-mechanized army of the river, as well as mountain passes;
- 4) study the Baltic and Southwestern theatres (Poland and Ukraine) of operations (ib., p. 195).

Regarding the *lessons* of the first game, there were the following conclusions:

- 1) The fortification systems are not enough in the new wars, they simply can be circumvented, but in some cases, the modern armies still must storm

the fortifications in order to continue their advances deeper into the enemy's territory;

2) One should strive to inflict the greatest damage on the attacker with firepower, not allowing the defeat of one's troops in parts in front of fortified areas.

3) It is also dangerous to leave the Suwalki-ledge, it is better to keep it behind you, so that in the future, with simultaneous strikes from the ledge from the Brest-Litovsk region to Baranovichi, isolate the entire main grouping of the Northwestern Front;

4) The playing parties did not organize a clear interaction of sea forces with land forces.

Thus, the results of the first game showed that the operational-strategic outlook of many top-level commanders was far from perfect and required further painstaking and persistent work in honing the art of command and control of large units, deep assimilation of the nature of modern operations, their organization, planning and consistent implementation on practice (Ib., pp. 197-201).

The second round of the games failed to adequately incorporate border changes, with players adhering to the pre-Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact borders. Additionally, the game overestimated the Red team's defence capabilities in comparison to the potential of the Blue team. The game's designers relied solely on the provisions articulated during the 1940 December meeting of senior command personnel, thereby neglecting the impact of new geopolitical realities near the Soviet borders. Moreover, the structure of the armies was rigid and inflexible, lacking integration of the regional and geographic specificities of different war theatres.

According to Soviet/Russian historian Pavel Bobylev the goals of the second war games were the following:

- To study and master the basics of the modern offensive operation of the front and the army;
- To master and work out the basics of conducting defensive operations in the conditions of a mountain theatre and in the defence of large river barriers;
- To explore the Southwestern theatre of operations;
- To give practice to senior command personnel in assessing the situation and making decisions in difficult conditions, in organizing, planning and logistical support for front-line and army operations, as well as in the field of driving large operational and, above all, mobile formations in cooperation with aviation;

- To achieve understanding and unity of views on the conduct of a modern offensive operation with the massive use of artillery, tank formations, and air forces (Бобылев П.Н, Военно-Исторический Журнал/Military-Historical Journal, 1993, No. 7, No. 8, p. 28).

In the second game of the same cycle, the Blue team concentrated its forces near the Soviet borders with the intention of launching a southern-directed offensive from Lublin down to the Black Sea. The primary engagements occurred in Eastern Poland. By advancing on two fronts – the Southeastern and Southern Fronts – in the general direction of Proskurov/Płoskirów, the Blue team aimed to encircle and eliminate the Lwow-Ternopil grouping of the Red forces.

Subsequently, they planned to advance towards Odessa, Khmelniki, Shepetovka, and the Sluch River. The naval forces of the Blue team were tasked with departing the Mediterranean Sea by 8 August and overcoming the resistance of the Red naval forces by 10 August. Their objective was to break the Red blockade in the Bosphorus and establish dominance in the Black Sea, thus providing support to the armies of the Southern Front along the coastal direction. In both scenarios, the Soviets considered the possibility of launching counteroffensives and even offensive operations in certain theatres.

The initial situation in this game looked like this: the Blue in alliance with the "Southwestern" and "Southern" began a war against the "Red", going on the offensive with two fronts – South-Eastern and Southern but at different times.

The Southeastern front began hostilities on 1 August 1941, against the Lwów-Ternopil grouping of the Red, however, at the line of Lwów, Kovel was met with a strong resistance of the Red and, having lost up to 20 infantry divisions, by the end of 8 August, withdrew to the previously prepared line of Starina, Grybów, Tarnów, Dunaetsand Vistula Rivers. The southern front went on the offensive on 2 August, in the Proskurov direction, from Romania. Its formations broke through the defences of the Red and, developing success, by the end of 8 August, they reached the Dniester River, crossing it in the areas of Kalyus, Komarovka and Melnitsa-Podolskaya. The common task of the two fronts was to encircle and destroy the enemy in the area of Kamenets-Podolsky, Kovel, Lublin, and Rzeszow and reach the Odessa, Vinnitsa, Shepetovka, Sarny fronts by 10 September.

The task of the Southwestern Front of the Red team (under the leadership of Zhukov) was to cover from the west along the Vistula River, with the main forces to destroy the "southwestern" and "southern" (Blue) on their territory and by 16 September, to reach the front of Krakow, Budapest, Timisoara, Craiova.

In the legend was indicated that the Red is facing problems with the numbers of infantry divisions and mechanized brigades. The biggest mistake of the Blue in this game, according to Bobylev, is the refusal of the Blue's command strike on the supply lines of Zhukov's army which stretched from Lwów to Kovel. Instead, the Blue attacked only Lwów and it allowed Zhukov to continue the counteroffensive operation on the territory of Central Poland. G.K. Zhukov began a major operation in the Budapest direction with a depth of up to 300 km. A strike on Budapest split the common front of the coalition of opponents, cut off the Blue from their allies, and ensured the final defeat of the "southwestern" and "southern". Thus, the "victory" in the second game was on the side of the Red. In general, according to the results of both games, success was achieved by the side whose troops were commanded by G.K. Zhukov.

Miscalculations, according to Zakharov, were also made at the games with the creation of an advantageous aspect ratio – an important factor in the preparation, conduct, and successful completion of any operations. The preponderance of infantry forces in both the first and second cases turned out to be on the side of the enemy. In particular, in the first game, this circumstance allowed the "Blue" to create a large grouping on their left flank to strike in the direction of Riga, Dvinsk, successfully solve this problem and win the operation. The creators of the game explained this miscalculation as follows: when developing the task, they proceeded from the fact that Soviet divisions were supposedly one and a half times stronger than the German ones, and therefore, with a smaller number of formations, the advantage in manpower and equipment was on their side. Thus, the General Staff believed that the enemy had no numerical superiority. Such a biased interpretation of this crucial issue was condemned as unfounded.

In this regard, Bobylev added that the level of an operation that was unfolding in the southwestern direction during the second game exceeded in its scope the operations of the first game and was not inferior to the operations of the Second World War (and in some respects even surpassed them). For example, the operations, which were undertaken by Zhukov, say exactly about such a level because Zhukov with successful counterattacks took Krakow and furthermore moved in the direction of Budapest.

The Soviet general and historian Bobylev argues with Zakharov and says that he was the first who in detail described the wargames, but he made many key errors.

Bobylev highlights that it was also supposed to study the Baltic theatre of operations and East Prussia, to get acquainted with the basics of a defensive

operation. The core positions in the wargames were given to the head of the military western districts because in case of war they had to take major responsibility, especially during the first days of the war. Thus, Moscow prepared for the offensive operation in Eastern Europe. It was planned to get acquainted with questions of defence only to the extent that they arise in the course of the case. The priority was the theoretical issues of attack, not the defence. As a zone of war was chosen the space between the Baltic and the Black Seas. In the General Staff, all arrangements were made under time pressure because in the autumn of 1940 the geostrategic situation changed and the Soviet command did not know the direction of the main attack of Germany (Belarus or Ukraine). In that period, it was made the decision to consider the main strike from Brest to the Black Sea, not from the territories of Eastern Prussia.

Bobylev writes that both games were held in three stages, at each of which the participants, in accordance with the tasks and received introductory decisions, made decisions and executed directives, combat orders, operational reports and other documents in writing, and ended with a decision on the situation by the end of the third stage. The generals from the Red team got information that the Blue (Western) already deployed forces to Soviet borders and concentrated from Dęblin to the Baltic Sea 60 divisions, but closer to Ukraine 120-150 divisions.

The group of armies northern of Dęblin did not wait for the full concentration of their troops, in the interests of the main attack, they went on the offensive (on 15 July) with the task of defeating the Belostok-Volkovysk and Kaunas groupings of the "Red" and by the end of 15 August to reach the front of Baranovich, Dvinsk, Riga. Eastern Prussia was the main centre of gravity for the attack on the Soviet position in the Baltic and Belarus. There the "Red" arrested the "Blue" attack and turned with the 50 divisions to counterattack. The North-Western Front of the "Red", having repelled the offensive of the "Blue", by 1 August reached the state border line and received the following task: to defeat the "Blue" in East Prussia and by 3 September 1941, to reach the river Vistula from Włocławek to the mouth.

Concurrently, the Blue did not achieve success in its march on Leningrad, instead, according to the game the Soviets managed to repel the Blue. As Bobylev wrote, the assignments for both the "Western" and the "Eastern" also described the situation in the Baltic Sea. Detailed reference information was attached to the assignments: tables of combat strength, statements of troop supply on the eve of operations, plans and tables of troop regroupings, information on the capacity

of railway sections etc. The decisions of the parties based on those data predetermined the course of the game (Ib., p. 16).

Here I would like to cite several paragraphs directly, without changes, because it has practical importance in case of war in the zone of the historical regions: Prussia, Podlachia, and Suwalki. For any future war in Eastern Europe, the commanders will face similar challenges as their predecessors faced when they fought in these territories. The Russo-Ukrainian War shows that both sides have been obliged to learn and study the logic of the decisions of commanders who fought in the areas of the old Wild Steppe. It is maybe the most important part of the wargames:

The commander of the North-Eastern Front of the *"Western"* (Blue) (his duties in the game were performed by G.K. Zhukov) decided: firmly rely on the fortified areas and borders of East Prussia, to prevent the enemy from invading the territory of the *"Western"*, but at the same time continue to concentrate suitable reserves, simultaneously by inflicting short blows with the aim of exhausting the enemy, in order to go over to the general offensive on 10 August 1941.

The presence of powerful fortifications, as well as a large number of roads that made it possible to quickly manoeuvre the forces and means, gave the *"Western"* the opportunity to hold the occupied lines (in particular, important in the operational direction Suwalki ledge) until the reserves approached. Thus, until 10 August, the North-Eastern Front (10th, 9th, and 8th armies) planned to conduct a defensive operation; then it was supposed to attack to a depth of 120-130 km to the line Bialystok, Volkovysk, Orany, Shavli lasting 12-13 days. During the next stage of the offensive, it was planned to fulfil the task set by the *"Western"* headquarters to reach the Minsk, Dvinsk, and Riga fronts by 5 September.

The commander of the North-Western Front of the *"Eastern"* (General of the Tank Forces D.G. Pavlov), when making a decision, proceeded from the fact that, by 1 August, the front had a general superiority over the enemy, and therefore, it was necessary to defeat the *"Western"* before the approach of their reserves, which, according to the assumptions of the command of the North-Western Front, could happen on 10-12 August (then the enemy could go on the offensive).

It was expected that relying on the Suwalki fortified area, the main forces of the *"Western"* would strike in the direction of Dvinsk and Riga, and simultaneously from the regions of Suwalki and Brest – to Baranovichi. The most dangerous was considered a strike from the Suwalki area to Grodno, Volkovysk with access to the rear of the left-flank armies of the North-Western Front. Therefore, it was considered expedient to start the offensive no later than 5 August, in order to break

up the forces of the *"Western"* on the first defensive line before approaching and putting their reserves into the battle.

The operation of the North-Western Front (Red) was presented to his headquarters in the following form:

- the first stage (1-5 August) – preparation for breaking through the first defensive line; the task is to destroy the enemy on the eastern bank of the Neman River, with private operations of the 1st Army, and prepare to cross it. The 14th Army and the 19th Army in the Suwalki area approach closer to the first defensive line and prepare for its breakthrough;
- the second stage (6-11 August) – forcing the Neman River and breaking through the first defensive line on the rest of the front with the destruction of the enemy on the eastern Masurian Lakes; breakthrough depth – 40-45 km;
- the third stage (12-15 August) – regrouping and preparation for breaking through the second defensive line;
- fourth stage (16-22 August) – a breakthrough of the second defensive line; breakthrough depth – 40-50 km;
- the fifth stage (23 August-3 September) – the development of the offensive operation, the defeat of reserves (reinforcements), and the establishment of the access to the Vistula River; advance depth – 180-200 km. The total depth of the front-line operation was 250-300 km according to the plan.

Many tasks which were indicated by the Soviet Command (Red) initially were fulfilled. The Soviets even managed to cross the Neman River and reach the echeloned defence of the Blue. Zhukov (Blue) organized effective defence and successfully used massive fortifications. As a result, the Soviets had been facing enormous resistance and losses. The fact is that, by decision of the commander of the North-Eastern Front of the Blue, on the right flank of defending the 9th Army of the *"Western"* in the area of Eastern Prussia, it was concentrated a large grouping of troops (four armies and one mechanized corps, two tank divisions, and four tank brigades). Such significant force was possible to create mainly due to the reserves that arrived on the front. On the morning of 12 August, this powerful group went on the offensive in the direction of Grabowo, Stawiski, and Lomrza. As result, the Red's front was broken. Zhukov with this manoeuvre changed completely the situation on the front and managed to achieve superiority of manpower and mechanized groups.

The Blue team won the initial stage of the war. Thus, the Red failed to encircle and defeat the East Prussian grouping of the Blue. Moreover, a significant number

of their own forces were under the threat of encirclement and defeat. Moscow was not satisfied with the results because they contradicted the official ideology (the Red could not be defeated) and this objective game demonstrated that all military calculations of the Soviet military command were based on the wrong theoretical grounds. However, despite all the mentioned aspects, it was the last important theoretical game for the Soviet military command before the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941.

After the end of the games, Stalin invited the generals who actively participated in the games to the Kremlin. Stalin was deeply dissatisfied with the fact of the Red's defeat and consequently appointed Zhukov as a Commander of the General Staff. Stalin reportedly stated after the games that, in reality, the Soviet command did not have a real head of the General Staff. Moreover, during the discussion, Zhukov drew attention on the fact that *"in Belarus, fortified lines (URs) are built too close to the border and they have an extremely unfavourable operational configuration, especially in the area of the Bialystok ledge. This will allow the enemy to strike from the area of Brest and Suwalki to the rear of our entire Bialystok grouping. In addition, due to the small depth, the URs cannot hold out for a long time, as they are shot through by artillery fire."* (Жуков/Zhukov, ib., p. 241).

Zhukov suggested to move to the east the fortifications from the Belarus border up to 100 km and create more secure strategic depth. Russian historian Sokolov criticized Zhukov because, in his opinion, the Soviet command prepared the offensive operation to invade the Western Europe and the defensive rhetoric as only a trick (Соколов/Sokolov, 2000, p. 199). Yet another Russian historian, Metukhov, writes that the success of Zhukov in Ukraine and Southern Poland during the second round of games and the defeat of the Red in the Northern Theatre (Belarus and Eastern Prussia) determined the decision of the Soviet Command to refuse to use Belarus as the zone of future offensive operations (Мельтюхов/Meltukhov, 2000).

Finally, I would like to refer to Professor Cynthia A. Roberts, who provided a quite objective and rational assessment of these wargames. She wrote the following: *"Despite the two very different results for the 'Eastern' or Soviet side in the games, both exercises were similar in their failure to consider realistic contingencies. Most important, the war games did not employ scenarios which fully embodied the experience of German operations in the West, thereby avoiding the importance of surprise, mass and striking power in German Blitzkrieg. Nor did the games reveal any recognition of the impediment that the Red Army, like its tsarist predecessor, was slow, ineffective and cumbersome. Germany's defeat of France and the Soviet*

Union's pyrrhic victory in the Winter War had demonstrated that the Red Army was unprepared for modern warfare; nevertheless, Soviet commanders continued to adhere to an obsolete doctrine which assumed a slower than realistic initial rate of advance for the enemy and the ability of the Soviet defender to stop the invader near the frontier and push him back across the border. In the war games, therefore, the standard conceptualization of the initial period remained unchallenged. [...] However, strong resistance mounted by the defender near Lvov, followed by counter-offensives, destroyed 20 enemy infantry divisions within a week. This orderly and effective response to Blitzkrieg in the initial period of war – on maps – had little in common with the chaos, confusion and headlong Soviet retreat which followed the German invasion of June 22". (Roberts, 1995, p. 1313).

THE PRE-WAR OPERATIONAL WARGAMES OF THE SOVIET UNION

It should be noted that in February 1941 the Soviet Union was conducting the wargames not only on the western war theatre, but also in the south theatres and some other military districts. For instance, in February 1941, Senior Instructor of the 7th Department of the Main Directorate of Political Propaganda and Culture of the Red Army (GUPPKA), I.P. Baikov, travelled to Tashkent to participate in a military-operational game of the Central Asian Military District (Невежин/Neveczhin, 1997, p. 124). In general, the Russian historians found the evidences from the Russian archives that only in the last six months before the actual start of the war were conducted the following wargames:

- Operational map exercise in the Baltic Military District (February);
- Bilateral encirclement operational exercise in the Odessa Military District (February);
- Field trip of staffs of the Leningrad, Ural, and Orel Military Districts (March);
- Field trip in the Arkhangelsk Military District (March);
- Operational military exercise in the Moscow Military District (March);
- Bilateral operational exercise in the Kharkov Military District (May);
- Frontline operational exercise in the Western Military District (March);
- Frontline field trip in the Baltic Military District (April);
- Staff operational-strategic exercise in the Arkhangelsk Military District (April);
- Command operational exercise in the Moscow Military District (May);
- Frontline operational exercise in the Kiev Military District (May);

- Joint exercises of the staffs of the Transcaucasian Military District and the Caspian Military Flotilla (May);
- Frontline field trip in the Baltic Military District (June) (Солонин/Solonin).

The level and importance of these games was less than of those that were held in Moscow, but it is clear that thorough preparation for big war would require organization of multilevel exercises from strategic, operational to tactical. Eventually, all these levels should be integrated into one conceptual picture of war. Russian historian Mark Solonin exactly proves in his article that at the operational and front level the Soviets were preparing for the joint-offensive operation. He refers to the exercises that were organized in the Kiev Military District (future South-Western front). According to the plan, the strongest concentration of forces had to be in this theatre. Moscow prepared attacks on the Lublin direction, together with Western front (Belarus). The General Staff had many other operative level games with the “legend” similar to two strategic games, but Solonin writes that if the strategic games were too ambitious, the operative level of the games as close as to the final date of 24 June 1941 became less ambitious and nobody even thought to attack Warsaw or Budapest.

MILITARY AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS TO THE COLD WAR

As it was indicated above, the Soviet military leadership did not have much experience in conducting massive military operations. They had the experience of the First World War, the Civil War, and Battles of Khalkhin Gol, and the war against Finland in 1940. Thus, at the end of 1940 and in January 1941, the Soviet command made the first big attempt to learn and accumulate the experiences and modern theories of warfare in several important wargames. In these games, the Soviet military command was learning how to fight big industrial wars and see the war as an integral part of the grand strategy. It was not a coincidence that immediately after the wargames the Soviet military command was seriously reshuffled and to power came younger and more advanced thinkers in terms of understanding the logic of future industrial wars. However, it should be noted that Zhukov confessed in his notes the following: *“It must be frankly said that neither the people’s commissar nor I had the necessary experience in preparing the armed forces for such a war that unfolded in 1941, and, as you know, experienced military personnel were exterminated in 1937-1939”*. (Документы: 1941 год: Кн. 1, Documents: Year 1941, p. 500).

The wargames and the future experience during the military campaigns against Germany once again strengthened the Soviet and Russian position regarding the concept of strategic depth and the western war theatre was going to be the central theatre in case of war with the West during the Cold War. If we speak about the 21st century, we again can see that Russia recalls its operational-strategic art on the doctrinal and practical levels.

CONCLUSIONS

In the two games the Blue attacked and the Red counterattacked. In both cases, the Soviet command pursued the goal to push the enemy out of the state borders and give the general battle on the territory of the enemy or at least finish with the remaining forces yet on the enemy’s territory. In both cases, it was the territory of contemporary Poland, which was under the control of Germany. In both games, it was important to reach the Vistula River. Most of the participants, from the Red and the Blue sides, had to solve problems in games. The same goal was pursued by the Soviet Russian General Mikhail Tuchachevsky in 1920 regarding Warsaw.

In terms of getting senior officers to practice leading troops in operations, the games achieved their goal; at the same time, they showed that many top-level commanders did not yet possess the necessary operational-strategic outlook, the art of troop control in the dynamics of operations. In both games, the Red was able to push the Red forces out of Soviet territory. This part of the games has not been disclosed properly. The Soviet command did not seriously elaborate on that initial stage of the war and concentrated rather on the operations than on developing sufficient defence in case of a massive attack of the Blue, which prevented an easy counterattack in the initial stage of the war. In the games was made the most dramatic error, the Soviet Stavka expected the main strike in the Ukrainian direction and Kyiv. The commanders were running the units, operations, and areas they had not commanded in the real war. Many commanders were from different military districts that had not dealt with the Germans at the first stage of the war.

After 1945 the information about these wargames was sealed in the archives, but definitely some part of the Soviet General Staff Academy and part of the military leadership of the USSR knew about these wargames. The first hectic mentions of the game exactly came from different memoirs of Soviet generals and historians. However, exactly these games institutionalized and systematized the Soviet military thinking and became the first intellectual grounds for the future wargames during the Cold War.

The modern geopolitical and military situation, as well as the current circumstances, require the military command of the NATO countries to constantly conduct in-depth wargames with the involvement of political and military leadership. Warfare in the 21st century more than ever demands the participation of economic, political, and social leadership in the process of planning and development of war scenarios.

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