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The Unchanging Nature of Russian Combat Methods

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As the Russian invasion of Ukraine approaches the one-year mark, Russia's offensive operations appear to have stalled. Having failed to seize the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv during the initial invasion, Russian President Vladmir Putin downsized his strategic goals to occupying and annexing the Donbas region consisting of the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as two other oblasts, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. At the same time, Ukraine has launched a series of counteroffensives reclaiming lost territory and imposing significant costs on the Russian Army's manpower and morale.[1] Published reports indicate the Russian Army suffers from logistical difficulties and equipment shortages.[2] Russia has reportedly turned to North Korea to resupply it with thousands of missiles and artillery shells and has received drones from Iran.[3] Russia's initial assault on Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, was turned back and Russian troops have sought to consolidate their gains in the southeastern part of the country, especially in the illegally-annexed areas with large Russian-speaking populations and which Russia recognized as independent republics prior to incorporating them into the Russian Federation after holding staged and unlawful referendums.

According to most analysts, this major military attack on an independent and democratic neighbor—the largest Russian ground combat operation since 1945—has not achieved any of its key objectives. Military observers are puzzled by this apparent failure to subdue what was seen as a clearly inferior fighting force.

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A decade of military modernization under Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was supposed to professionalize and modernize Russia's armed forces. So why have these same armed forces failed so far to seize Ukraine? The answer may lie in the very nature of the Russian military and even the Russian people themselves.

At the end of World War II, the U.S. Army's European Command (EUCOM) and the Army Center for Military History interviewed former senior German military officers who had fought the Russians on the Eastern Front. Knowing that the next war in Europe might be against the Soviet Union, the Army wanted to gain insights from military leaders who had fought against Soviet forces. The result was the GERMAN REPORT SERIES published in the late 1940's and early 1950's. One such publication from the series is entitled *Russian Combat Methods in World War II*.[4] Allowing for the biases of the German officers who were interviewed, the publication provides insights into how Russian forces are performing 75 years later.

The Russian Soldier

The report states that the Russian soldier "…possesses neither the judgement nor the ability to think independently" and has a "Disregard for human beings and a contempt of death…"[5] Both characteristics are on full display in Ukraine. Press reports show how Russian forces are blindly attacking civilian targets with complete disregard for civilian casualties.[6] "Unqualified obedience" in WWII and the Cold War was enforced by Red Army political commissars. While the Soviet commissars are gone, Russian military leaders from the top down continue to value blind obedience to orders over initiative at the small unit level. In contrast Ukrainian small unit leaders, trained by NATO to take the initiative at the lowest levels of command, are running circles around Russian forces.[7] The result is that Ukrainian forces are nimbly outmaneuvering their Russian counterparts. For Russia, the result was a ponderous and ineffective initial assault against a much weaker enemy that failed, followed by a near stalemate in the Donbas and in southern Ukraine. Russian military leaders, like their forbearers, have shown little regard for the lives of their soldiers as they are sent into battle untrained and unsupported.

As a class, today's Russian soldiers do not seem particularly adept in operating in the field. In the foreword to *Combat In Russian Forests and Swamps,* former German General Franz Halder, Chief of the German Army General Staff from 1938-1942, noted that in WWII, "…the Russian was able to move about in these impenetrable forests and treacherous swamps with the instincts and sense of security of an animal…." Halder observed that Russian troops were able to do so because they were born into an agrarian society and raised in the forests and swamps of Eastern Europe and Western Russia. Interestingly, Halder went on to observe that "In the course of several generations the Soviet policy of concentrating masses of workers in large industrial areas will certainly have the effect of eliminating these natural instincts…."[8]

The poor performance of both the professional Russian soldiers and conscripts in Ukraine seems to validate Halder's prophetic observation. Since the invasion began in February 2022, there have been numerous reports of the poor performance of the Russian soldier in the field. There are multiple reasons for this—poor training, lack of clear motivation, and brutal and incompetent leadership. It is clear however that unlike their WWII counterparts, who were willing to suffer incredible hardships for the Motherland, Russian soldiers today are surrendering or running from the fight in large numbers.[9] Raised in the cities of the post-Soviet era, today's Russian soldier is showing little ability to operate in the severe field environment that is Ukraine.

Russian Combat Methods

The German generals made several observations regarding Russian combat methods in WWII that have echoes in today's war in Ukraine.

Reconnaissance – The generals noted that Russian infantrymen were not "inquisitive" and as such, Russian reconnaissance was extremely poor.[10] They also noted that if reconnaissance elements met no resistance, Russian forces would plunge "…ahead into the unknown without further reconnaissance."[11] This seems consistent with some early video of Russian reconnaissance units in Ukraine being surrounded, destroyed, or repulsed in the early days of the conflict even as major assault elements seemed blind to Ukrainian defenses.

In a recent study for the Association of the United States Army (AUSA), LTC Amos Fox, USA, wrote that in Ukraine, "Due to insufficient, ineffective or non-existent reconnaissance, advancing Russian BTGs (Battalion Tactical Groups) blindly and unwittingly impaled themselves during their push to take those cities."[12] Fox observes that this lack of reconnaissance caused advancing BTGs to move blindly into Ukrainian ambushes. In static or defensive positions, the BTGs have no indication what is in front of them making them easy targets for Ukrainian attack. Like their WW II counterparts, Russian interest in reconnaissance continues to be poor.[13]

Artillery – The German generals observed that Russian artillery "…developed to a high degree the use of mass as a particularly characteristic procedure."[14] In addition, the generals observed that "Russian artillery fire often had no primary target but covered the entire area with the same intensity."[15] In the later stages of WWII, Soviet artillery density often reached 250-300 guns and/or mortars per kilometer. This level of density made it possible to "…solve combat tasks successfully in all types of combat operations."[16]

This propensity to mass rockets and artillery on military and civilian targets is playing out in Ukraine. A July 2022 report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) stated that "The generally mediocre performance of Russia's ground forces has been increasingly offset by their

leveraging of massed artillery fires to facilitate a slow and methodical advance."[17] Since that time, Russian forces have almost ceased to maneuver either with or without artillery support. Instead, in mid-October Russia began a drone campaign against Ukrainian cities using the Iranian-made Shahed-136, a "kamikaze" drone.[18] The mass use of drones against civilian infrastructure is a modern-day version of Russia's tendency in WWII to attack with no primary target over a wide area in an attempt to achieve desired effects.

Armor – The German generals noted that "…the Russian armored force was not as good as the Russian artillery," citing a lack of flexibility and inability of commanders to exploit success. They also observed that "The training of the individual tank driver was inadequate..." and that "The Russian avoided driving his tank through hollows and along reverse slopes, preferring to choose a route along crests which would give fewer driving difficulties."[19] These observations seem consistent with Russian armor operations in Ukraine. Many armor troops in the initial Russian invasion force were conscripts with minimal training. Despite the flat terrain and frozen ground, most Russian armor appeared to be road-bound as commanders sought to avoid maneuver in open areas.

To date, Russian commanders have been unable to create any major breakthroughs as the initial failed assaults demonstrate. Most Russian tank advances were made only after massive artillery barrages rather than large, armored sweeps across open terrain. The Russian armor's main contribution is its sheer mass and numbers, just as it was in WWII. However Russian armor forces remain largely road-bound and an easy target for Ukrainian drones, artillery and anti-tank weapons. The web site Oryx estimates that Russia has lost 1,393 destroyed, damaged, captured or abandoned tanks since the invasion began in February.[20]

The Russian Air Force – "The Russian Air Force often was no factor at all in ground warfare."[21] This stark assessment of the World War II Russian Air Force has interesting parallels to today's conflict. Given the disparity of forces, the Russian Air Force should have had complete air supremacy over Ukrainian airspace from day one of the invasion. This would have allowed for coordinated close air support to advancing ground units and the strategic bombing of key Ukrainian infrastructure. Almost a year into the war, the Russian Air Force continues to struggle for air superiority and air power seems to be more of a weapon of terror than anything else. Failure to effectively use air power is one key factor in Russia's stalled advance in Ukraine.[22]

One air power defense expert, Dr. Justin Bronk, stated in a RUSI study that "…the VKS (Russian Aerospace Forces) lacks the institutional capacity to plan, brief, and fly complex air operations at scale."[23] He cites three possible reasons for his conclusion. First, while the VKS has acquired combat experience in Syria, it has largely been in small two ship or four ship formations. There is no experience in coordinating flights involving tens or hundreds of aircraft. Second, VKS pilots only receive about 100 hours of flying hours per year. This is half

the number of hours of their NATO counterparts. Third, the VKS has shown no ability to coordinate the various mission sets—aerial reconnaissance, suppression of enemy air defenses, deep strike and close air support—in order to gain air superiority. Despite years of modernization, the VKS lacks sufficient precision munitions. Like their WWII counterparts, Russian military leaders appear unable to employ air power effectively in support of ground forces.

Combined Arms Maneuver – This may be one of the report's most telling observations. It notes that the "…lack of any cooperation between the various Russian arms and the deficiency in technical skill, led to continuous failures…."[24] Modern combined arms warfare calls for technical expertise in individual military specialties and the ability to use them in a coordinated fashion to achieve assigned objectives. Combining fires (air, artillery, mortars) and maneuver (infantry, armor), supported by a robust logistics element is the key to success. The United States proved this in Desert Shield/Desert Storm and again in the Iraq War of 2003. To date, the Russians have failed to demonstrate an ability to effectively conduct modern combined arms warfare despite twenty years of modernization and reform in the Russian Army.

The Russian ground force in Ukraine is comprised of the previously mentioned BTGs. These are combined armed units that draw from companies and battalions from standing brigades. Each BTG includes mechanized infantry, tank, artillery, reconnaissance, engineer and logistics elements. The BTG is theoretically capable of conducting independent combined arms operations. At full strength, a BTG should have approximately 800 personnel. However, in Ukraine, the actual Russian BTG strength is closer to 600 with much of the shortfall located in the infantry.[25]

LTC Fox observes that the BTGs were effective in the 2014-2015 Donbas campaign. In that operation, the theater was much smaller, and the Russian formations had the advantage of moving forward to link up with friendly separatist forces. BTG commanders did not need to coordinate reconnaissance, fires and maneuver to advance short distances into what was friendly territory. In the current conflict against hostile Ukrainian forces across wide swaths of territory the BTGs have essentially failed. Fox cites poor communications, inability to coordinate supporting arms and lack of proper logistical support as key failings. Thus, Fox concludes that the BTG, while effective in a smaller theater of conflict, is the wrong formation for the current one.[26] Again, today's Russian Army, like its WW II counterpart, is unable to coordinate surface and air delivered fire support with reconnaissance and maneuver forces in an effective manner.

On 29 November 2022, the United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MOD) reported that Russia had "likely largely stopped" employing BTGs. The MOD stated that "Several intrinsic weaknesses of the BTG concept have been exposed in the high intensity, large-scale combat of the Ukraine war so far."[27] The MOD cited a recently released RUSI report that outlined major

shortcomings in the BTG concept. That report stated that "The Soviet Military was structured to fight in regiments, divisions and combined arms armies…." This structure allowed the Soviet military to mass forces, especially artillery, as part of their battle doctrine.[28]

The German generals noted that in June 1941, Hitler's surprise attack on the Soviet Union led to initial Soviet reversals. However, the USSR's large reservoir of manpower, coupled with material assistance from the United States, eventually allowed Soviet generals to use mass to defeat the German Army. In fact, the German generals noted, "Step by step, the German Army was pounded to pieces and crushed as it succumbed to what might be termed a 'super steam roller.'"[29] If the Russians are moving away from the BTG they may attempt to return to the mass formations of the Soviet era in an attempt to wear down the Ukrainian forces. It remains to be seen if the Russians have the will to commit, or have the capability to generate, the formations required to execute this strategy.

Conclusion

Despite twenty years of modernization, the nature of the Russian military, particularly the Russian Army, bears some of the same characteristics of its World War II predecessor. At the core of the problem are endemic issues within the Russian armed forces that have endured since WWII. Now, as then, risk adverse leaders allow junior leaders no initiative at the lower echelons. Poorly trained conscripts are unable to operate and maintain modern military equipment or conduct required complex maneuvers on the ground. Artillery and air support are used as mass terror weapons rather than as coordinated supporting arms for ground maneuver forces.

In World War II, the Russian Army ultimately prevailed over the German Wehrmacht in the East. It did so for a variety of reasons including an exhausted Germany fighting on two fronts and the sheer mass of the Russian military in the East. The Russian armed forces today may yet defeat the Ukrainian Army and capture the entire country. If it does, it will do so through mass and firepower rather than the expert application of military force.

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