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# Maps, Illustrations, and Tables

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“The Motherland calls!”

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Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition

When the first edition of this book was published in 1995, the authors gratefully benefited from the modest first wave of archival materials released by the Russian Federation, which increased our knowledge of the war twofold and enabled us to add substantial Russian context and detail to what had previously been a largely German perspective on the war. Thanks to those initial releases, the book’s first edition restored a modicum of truth and accuracy to the Soviet side of the war by identifying battles forgotten or concealed for political reasons and by adding more candid detail to the description of battles already well known. Likewise, a clearer understanding of what the Red Army actually achieved tempered the obvious German bias so evident in the historiography on the war during the Cold War years. However, despite those beneficial releases, yawning gaps still existed in the historical record of the war in 1995, the most vexing of which was the paucity of accurate numbers quantifying the scope and ferocity of the struggle. Now, most of those gaps have been filled, and the missing numbers are becoming readily available.

With this passage of time, the amount of archival materials available to flesh out an accurate description of the war, particularly from the Soviet perspective, has increased more than a hundredfold. Up to 60 percent of the war’s content remained largely conjecture in 1995, but by 2015, this figure had decreased to roughly 10 percent. As a result, clarity is replacing opacity and truth is steadily winning out.

Readers have the right to know what is new and different about this edition. First and foremost, this edition exploits the massive amount of previously unavailable archival documents related to the war that the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation has released since 1995. These documents include many, if not most, of the wartime directives, orders, and reports prepared by the Soviet State Defense Committee (GKO); the Stavka (headquarters of the Supreme High Command); the Red Army and Navy General Staffs; the People’s Commissariat of Defense (NKO) and its many subordinate directorates; the Red Army’s operating fronts, armies, and in some cases corps, divisions, and brigades; and the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) and its subordinate directorates for border guards,
as well as operational and convoy and installation security troops. The twenty-six tables in the book’s second edition (versus the five in the 1995 edition) attest to the magnitude of new statistical evidence describing the scale of Soviet participation in the war.

Among other things, the new edition broadens the definition of available manpower on both sides, including such overlooked groups as NKVD troops, Axis satellite armies, and dissident forces that the Germans recruited in the non-Russian portions of the USSR. It rejects traditional efforts by German generals to hold Adolf Hitler solely responsible for all German errors and atrocities. And it includes recent scholarship on German security actions and exploitation of the occupied rear areas.

Aside from official Russian releases of archival materials, cooperative programs between the Russian and U.S. armies in the early 1990s resulted in the release of extensive Red Army and Navy General Staff multivolume collections (Sborniki) of war experience materials, organized topically and functionally. These included detailed and candid studies, formerly classified, of wartime military operations (such as Moscow, Belorussia, Berlin, and the battle for the Dnepr River) and subject areas related to the actual conduct of warfare (offense, defense, river crossings, amphibious and airborne operations, and so forth). Supplementing these materials were numerous dissertations on military subjects prepared by graduates of the Voroshilov Academy of the General Staff and a wide array of textbooks on wartime military operations used in education by the Frunze Academy.

Above and beyond official sources, since 1995 a new generation of civilian Russian military historians have emerged, scholars who have accomplished extensive research of their own and written often refreshingly candid studies of the war as a whole, together with its component military operations. As evidenced by the new bibliography, these too have become fodder for this book’s second edition.

If military operations provide the backbone and skeleton of the German and Soviet war efforts, equally vital political, economic, and social issues provide rationale and context for those operations and, at the same time, reflect what took place on the battlefield. For example, a more thorough understanding of what the Red Army hoped to achieve militarily now provides keener insights into what Joseph Stalin hoped to achieve politically during and after the war. Likewise, revelations concerning the human and economic costs of the war generate better understanding of the conflict’s impact on Germany and the Soviet Union socially and economically, while also under-scoring its ferocity in terms of human misbehavior and resultant atrocities. Closely associated with these themes are tragedies and crimes resulting from extreme Nazi racial theories and the excesses of Communist totalitarianism (for instance, the Holocaust, Katyn, and Baba Iar).
The collapse of the German Democratic Republic disclosed many German military documents that were previously thought lost in the destruction of the war. This treasure trove provided the raw data for a magisterial German official history of the war, as well as numerous monographs by Western scholars on aspects ranging from the number of tanks present at Kursk to the internal workings of the German war economy. This second edition includes the key findings of this new generation of Western historians, resulting in a more balanced account that seeks to reflect the major issues confronting both sides in the conflict.

Despite the flood of new archival materials, this edition strives to mine this information economically by keeping the book relatively short. As a result, we have deliberately condensed the hundredfold increase in information into a roughly 15 percent increase in the book's size. We do so in the hope that this fresh exposition, together with a more extensive bibliography, will encourage readers to use this book as a launching pad for further study of the war.

One note about unit designations: with regard to major German and Axis headquarters, we have followed the military convention that numerical designations should be spelled out, as with First Panzer Army or Third Romanian Army. However, Soviet fronts (equivalent to army groups) and field armies, especially the all-important tank armies, were often smaller than their German equivalents. Moreover, we wished to avoid confusion between the opposing army headquarters. As a result, we have used numerical equivalents when identifying Red Army field headquarters, such as 4th Ukrainian Front, 2nd Shock Army, or 6th Guards Tank Army. By the same token, we have used the German form of roman numerals to designate Axis corps (XXXX Motorized Corps), while again using ordinal numbers for their Soviet equivalents (3rd Cavalry Corps).

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Acknowledgments

The authors owe a special debt to the historians who struggled for decades to unearth the truths of the German-Soviet conflict, among them a host of Russian military historians who have had to contend not just with the usual difficulties of historical research but also with stifling and rigid constraints, first those of ideology under the Soviet Union and then those of virulent nationalism under the Russian Federation. This work and others like it are testaments to their doggedness and skill, seeking the truth despite formidable obstacles. Among Western military historians, early scholars such as Malcolm MacIntosh and John Erickson marked the way for others to follow. Their contributions have stood the test of time. Earl F. Ziemke, Albert Seaton, and others who have worked primarily with German archival materials also demand recognition, as do numerous German and Soviet veterans who wrote memoirs about a war against a shadowy enemy.

The first edition of this book was an effort to capture the Soviet version of the war and provide it in a brief format for the Western public. Since then, however, increased access to both German and Soviet archives has spawned an entirely new generation of historians, both in the West and in the former Soviet Union. This current edition is therefore an attempt to summarize this new historiography, to provide a more balanced explanation for the war’s outcome while retaining the original orientation toward Soviet sources. Indeed, by addressing some of the faulty explanations for German failure, this account more clearly demonstrates the reasons for and magnitude of Soviet success.

Above all, the authors acknowledge the millions of Soviet, German, and other soldiers who fought, suffered, and died in this titanic and brutal struggle. Their sacrifice demands that this story be retold and restudied with each generation.

Finally, heartfelt thanks go to the able editors of the University Press of Kansas and to Mary Ann Glantz, who were instrumental in shaping the first edition into a usable form. Likewise, Darin Grauberger and George F. McCleary, Jr. prepared superb maps for the first edition. For the revised edition, our mutual friend and colleague Christopher Gabel reviewed the entire manuscript; others, including Jacob Kipp, John Kuehn, Dennis Giangreco, and Bruce Menning, greatly improved the final product by their review of various portions of the draft.
Map 1. Theater of Operations
PRELUDE

1918–1941
CHAPTER ONE

The Red Army, 1918–1939

RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR, 1918–1921

One of the ironies of Russian history is that, having seized power in Petrograd by undermining military discipline and civil authority, the Bolsheviks had to create their own strong armed forces in order to survive. The shock troops of the October 1917 revolution were militant soldiers and sailors, but even with the addition of the armed workers of the Red Guard, these forces were inadequate to face the threats to the infant Soviet state.

From every direction, foreign enemies and so-called White Russian forces menaced the new government. With the Imperial Russian Army exhausted by three years of world war and wracked by mutiny and desertion, nothing stood between the new government and the victorious German Army. In March 1918, the Germans dictated an armistice and then roamed at will over western Russia. Even after the Western Allies defeated the Germans in November, German troops supported the breakaway Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as well as a separatist movement in the Ukraine. Once the Bolshevik government signed the armistice with Germany, its former allies also intervened in an effort to reverse the revolution and bring Russia back into the world war. To support the White cause, American and British soldiers landed at Arkhangelsk and Murmansk in the north, and additional British and French forces operated in Odessa, Crimea, and the Caucasus. In Siberia, the highly effective Czech Army, composed of former Russian prisoners of war (POWs) who had enlisted to fight against Austria-Hungary, dominated the transcontinental railway line in support of the Whites. Japanese, American, and other troops spread westward to Irkutsk in Siberia from the Pacific port of Vladivostok.

The result was the Russian Civil War of 1918–1921, a formative experience for both the Soviet state and its Red Army. During 1918 and 1919, V. I. Lenin and his commissar for military affairs, L. D. Trotsky, used the railroad lines to shuttle their limited reserves from place to place, staving off defeat time after time. This became known as echelon war, in which large forces were shifted on internal lines by railroad train (echelon) to reinforce successively threatened fronts. Some infantry divisions shifted between fronts as many as five times in the course of the war. This experience gave
all participants an abiding sense of the need for strategic reserves and forces arrayed in great depth.¹

Necessity forced Lenin to declare “War Communism,” a system of forced requisitions and political repression. To create an effective military force, the new government had to conscript men of all social backgrounds and accept the services of thousands of former Imperial officers. In turn, the need to ensure the political loyalty of these “military experts” led to the institution of a political commissar for each unit who had to approve all decisions of the nominal commander.

Ultimately, the new government triumphed. In early 1920, the Czech commander in Siberia turned over to the Soviets the self-appointed White Russian leader, Admiral A. V. Kolchak, in return for unrestricted passage out of the country. Later that same year, the Red Army repulsed a Polish invasion in support of the Ukrainian separatists but was itself halted by “the miracle along the Vistula [River]” just short of Warsaw. For years thereafter, the leaders of the Red Army engaged in bitter recriminations concerning the responsibility for this defeat. Despite the Polish setback, by 17 November 1920 the Reds drove the last White Russians out of the Crimea. Foreign armies also withdrew. After a few actions in Turkestan and the Far East, the war was over.

In the process, the first generation of Soviet military commanders developed a unique view of warfare. In the West, the trench stalemate of World War I dominated most military experience, albeit reformers sought various solutions to that stalemate. The Eastern Front, being longer and less well fortified, had never been as rigid as the trenches in France. More importantly, the Russian Civil War was characterized by vast distances defended by relatively small armies. Soviet commanders tried to integrate all tactical operations into an overall campaign plan, aiming for objectives deep in the enemy’s rear. The two keys to victory proved to be concentration of superior forces to overwhelm the enemy at a particular point, followed by rapid maneuvers such as flank attacks, penetrations, and encirclements to destroy the thinly spread enemy. Such maneuvers required a highly mobile offensive force, which in the Civil War consisted of armored railroad trains and cars together with horse cavalry. The elite of the Red Army, Marshal S. M. Budenny’s 1st Cavalry Army, produced a generation of officers who believed passionately in the value of mobility and maneuver and soon embraced mechanized forces as the weapon of choice.²

RISE OF THE DEEP OPERATION, 1922–1937

In the immediate postwar era, the chaotic state of the Soviet economy precluded the expense of a large standing army, and by 1925, the Red Army had
been reduced to 562,000 men—one-tenth of its peak wartime strength. Cavalry and some rifle divisions near the borders remained at reduced size; the majority of other divisions retained only a fraction of their required strength. These divisions relied upon reservists drawn from particular territorial regions. The system adopted in 1924–1925, a combination of regular cadre formations and territorial militia forces, was supposed to produce almost 140 divisions in wartime, but its peacetime capability was extremely limited.3

In an era of retrenchment, one of the few sources of funds and equipment for weapons experimentation was the secret Soviet-German military collaboration. The two former enemies shared both a fear of Poland and a need to circumvent the restrictions placed on them by the Western Allies after World War I. The Treaty of Versailles (1919) not only restricted the German Army (Reichswehr) to 100,000 long-term soldiers but also forbade Germany to possess tanks, poison gas, aircraft, and other advanced weapons. For a decade after 1921, therefore, the Germans provided funds and technical assistance to produce and test such weapons within the Soviet Union. Both sides gained the opportunity to test equipment they could not otherwise have possessed, although the actual number of weapons involved was relatively small.4

Soviet-German cooperation included exchanging observers for military maneuvers, but in retrospect, the two armies developed their military doctrine and theories almost independently. The Red Army began to educate its officers during the 1920s, but it also used its experience of maneuver in the Civil War as a means for reviewing all concepts of waging war. The former tsarist officer A. A. Svechin led the strategic debate, while M. V. Frunze attempted to formulate a uniform military doctrine appropriate for a socialist state.5

Meanwhile, the brilliant Civil War commander Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky and the military theorist Vladimir K. Triandafilov developed a strategic theory of successive operations based on the Soviet military failure against Poland in 1920 and the failed German offensives in France during 1918. Put simply, they believed that modern armies were too large and resilient to be defeated in one cataclysmic battle. Instead, the attacker would have to fight a series of offensive battles, each followed by a rapid exploitation into the enemy rear and then another battle when the defender reorganized his forces.6

To place these battles in a common strategic context, Soviet soldiers began to think of a new level of warfare, connecting the tactics of individual battles with the strategy of an entire war. This intermediate level became known as Operational Art (operativnaia iskusstva). Operational Art is the realm of senior commanders who plan and coordinate operations of large formations within the context of an entire campaign; that is, a series of actions culminating in the achievement of a strategic objective. In 1927, Svechin summarized this structure as follows: “Tactics makes the steps from which operational leaps are assembled, strategy points out the path.”7
Chapter One

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet theorists perfected the tactical concept of Deep Battle (глубокий бой). They planned to use new technology, especially tanks and aircraft, to penetrate the elaborate defense systems of the world war. First mentioned in the Field Regulations of 1929, Deep Battle found full expression in the Instructions on Deep Battle published six years later.

By 1936, technological change led, in turn, to the larger concept of the Deep Operation (глубокая операция). Instead of planning to penetrate the enemy in a single deep battle, Tukhachevsky and others projected penetrations and exploitations to an operational depth of 100 kilometers (62 miles) or more. The essence of such a deep operation was to use modern weapons at one blow to neutralize all of the enemy’s defenses to the maximum possible depth and then exploit so rapidly that the defender could not reorganize his units. This meant simultaneous operations at various points, all carefully coordinated. As A. I. Egorov wrote, “The principal and basic task of military art is to prevent the formation of a firm front [by the defender], imparting a destructive striking force and a rapid tempo to operations.”

Initially, Tukhachevsky and the other theorists intended to use the weapons of the Russian Civil War—infantry, artillery, and cavalry supplemented by armored cars. In that form, Tukhachevsky’s tactics would differ little from those of other armies. During and immediately after World War I, most Western theorists viewed the tank as an infantry-support weapon to help penetrate prepared defenses. Yet, Soviet theory evolved rapidly, and by the early 1930s, Red theorists included the entire spectrum of mechanized forces functioning as a sophisticated combined-arms team. Infantry, led by tanks and supported by artillery and engineers, would penetrate the enemy’s defenses while other artillery and aircraft struck deeper into the enemy’s rear, to be followed by large, independent airborne and armored formations. Tanks would therefore be organized into three echelons: some tanks would lead the infantry penetration, others would conduct short-range exploitations of the resulting breakthrough, and still others, operating in large combined-arms mechanized formations, would pursue and encircle the beaten enemy.

These concepts, which appeared in print as early as 1929, were codified in the Red Army’s Provisional Field Service Regulations of 1936 (PU-36).

The idea of a deep, mechanized operation was not unique for its time. Military theories in all major armies evolved in the same general direction, using varying degrees of mechanization to penetrate enemy defenses and thereby avoid the stalemate of trench warfare. What was unprecedented about the Soviet concept was the official sanction it received from the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin. Stalin dedicated a large proportion of his first five-year economic development plan to providing the industrial capacity and production needed to implement that concept. Given the shortcomings of
Russian industry during the world war and the belief that the Communist revolution remained vulnerable to capitalist attack, Stalin gave a high priority to the development of his munitions industry.

The effort bore fruit in a surprisingly short time. Despite the relative poverty of the Soviet economy, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 helped justify a high priority for weapons production. With the exception of a few experimental vehicles, the Soviet Union did not produce its first domestic tank, the MS-1, based on the American designs of Walter Christie, until 1929. Four years later, Russian factories were turning out 3,000 tanks and other armored vehicles per year. Similarly rapid growth occurred in aircraft, artillery, and other armaments.10

This official support was the basis for a steady growth in mechanized force structure. The first experimental tank regiment took shape in Moscow in 1927, using sixty foreign-built tanks.11 Three years later, in May 1930, the first experimental mechanized brigade appeared, composed of armored, motorized infantry, artillery, and reconnaissance units.12

The development of the Deep Operation called for larger mechanized formations to penetrate enemy defenses and exploit rapidly. On 9 March 1932, a special commission of the People’s Commissariat of Defense (NKO) recommended creation of armored forces at every level of command. Each rifle (infantry) division of 12,500 men (18,000 in wartime) would include a battalion of 57 light tanks, and each cavalry division would have a mechanized regiment of 64 light tanks. Every rifle corps was supposed to have a tank brigade in its general reserve, and a separate mechanized corps, acting as the mobile group first developed during the Civil War era, would conduct deep exploitations. Each of these corps, composed of one rifle and two tank brigades, was slightly larger than a Western division and integrated the different combined arms—tank, motorized infantry, artillery, engineers, and antiaircraft guns.

The Soviets formed their first two mechanized corps in the fall of 1932, three years before Germany created its first panzer divisions. Over the next several years, the number and complexity of armored, mechanized, and airborne formations grew steadily. The airborne forces were elite units, composed largely of dedicated Communists who had learned to parachute in the Komso-mol (Leninist Youth) organization. Large-scale exercises tested the theory of combined mechanized and airborne offensives. At the same time, the rest of the Red Army gradually shifted to a regular structure, eliminating the mixed territorial cadre system. By June 1938, the Red Army was a full-time force of 1.5 million men. In response to the growing German menace, the army conducted a rolling, gradual mobilization, reaching 2.3 million men in 170 under-strength rifle divisions by 1 December 1939, 4.5 million in 161 rifle divisions by 1 February 1940, and 5 million in 196 rifle divisions by June 1941.13
The Soviet development of mechanization was not perfect. Just as in pre-war Germany, the majority of Soviet tanks were lightly armored, relying on speed for protection. The Soviets were so far ahead of their Western counterparts that much of the Soviet weaponry produced in the early and mid-1930s was obsolescent and worn out by the time war came in 1941. Because the average Soviet soldier had little experience with motor vehicles, the equipment proved difficult to maintain in the field. Radio communications, essential for battlefield maneuver, were notoriously unreliable. In 1935, the Red Army reduced the authorized size of a mechanized corps because it had proven too large and unwieldy to maneuver. Moreover, the emphasis upon mechanized attacks meant that the Red Army neglected planning and training for the defensive, at least at the operational level. Left undisturbed, the Soviet tankisti (tank crews) would have required several more years to work out such issues.

Despite these deficiencies, in the mid-1930s the Soviet Union led the world in the production, planning, and fielding of mechanized forces. It was well ahead of its German counterparts in both theoretical concepts and practical experience of armored warfare. In Germany, Heinz Guderian and other armored theorists received only limited support from civilian and military leaders. Adolf Hitler used panzers as part of his diplomatic bluff against other powers, but he gave priority of production to the Luftwaffe (the German Air Force); a significant portion of tanks actually produced were assigned to infantry-support rather than combined-arms duty. At the same time, the German Army as a whole went through many growing pains after fifteen years of restrictions under the Treaty of Versailles. Large, operational-level employment of panzer forces was still an experiment even in the 1940 campaign. In short, had the Germans and Soviets fought during the mid-1930s the Red Army would have had a considerable advantage.

By 1939, that advantage had disappeared, due largely to a purge of the officer corps. This was a constant phenomenon of the new Soviet state; in the decade between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s, the government discharged some 47,000 officers, many of them with prior service in the Imperial Army. Three thousand of these officers were convicted of various alleged crimes. Beginning in 1934, however, Stalin systematically purged all aspects of Soviet society, turning to the army in 1937.

The motivation for this purge is still much debated, with some arguing that Stalin genuinely feared military treason and others focusing on the army as an institution that might limit his power. In addition, the Soviet dictator had always been uncomfortable with innovative theorists such as Tukhachevsky.
Like Hitler, he valued loyalty, orthodoxy, and intellectual subservience. Stalin’s unimaginative crony, Defense Commissar Kliment E. Voroshilov, encouraged this prejudice because of his own resentment against the young cavalry expert. Voroshilov eagerly repeated rumors of a military conspiracy centered on Tukhachevsky, whose past service under the exiled Trotsky and extended visit to Germany provided some reason for suspicion. On 27 May 1937, Marshal Tukhachevsky and a number of colleagues were arrested.  

In contrast to the purges of civil society, the accused underwent hasty, secret trials, suggesting that they were not willing to confess to their alleged crimes. One officer committed suicide rather than serve on the board that tried Tukhachevsky, but other senior leaders cooperated. On 12 June 1937, Voroshilov announced the execution of the marshal, the commanders of two military districts, and six other high-ranking colleagues. For the next four years, right up to the German invasion, Soviet officers disappeared with alarming frequency, with many officers executed and others sent to the labor camps in Siberia. In addition to the heads of nine staff directorates in Moscow, the victims included the commanders of all sixteen military districts, 90 percent of the deputy commanders, chiefs of staff, and staff section heads of such districts, 80 percent of corps and division commanders, and 91 percent of regimental commanders, deputies, and chiefs of staff.

The final toll included 2 successive heads of the Red Air Force, 15 admirals, and 3 of the 5 marshals of the Soviet Union. In all, 14 of the 16 field army commanders, 136 of 199 division commanders, and 50 percent of all regimental commanders were also disgraced and imprisoned or executed. Out of an estimated total of 75,000 to 80,000 military officers, at least 34,000 and perhaps as many as 54,700 endured dismissal during the purges. Political commissars and security officers of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) also suffered heavily. The purges were still ongoing when war engulfed the Soviet Union in 1941, with some of the purged, such as future Marshal of the Soviet Union K. A. Meretskov, literally released as war began in order to occupy key positions in the Red Army as it fought for its life.

Few, if any, of the commanders convicted had committed identifiable crimes. The only consistent criterion appeared to be elimination of all senior leaders who did not owe their careers to Stalin and might therefore challenge his authority. Of those imprisoned, 11,500 eventually gained reinstatement. Perhaps the most famous former prisoner was Konstantin K. Rokossovsky, who ended the war as a marshal of the Soviet Union commanding a front (army group).

An entire generation of commanders, government administrators, and factory managers was decimated. Younger men, often lacking combat experience or training for their positions, found themselves thrust into high command. In 1938, for example, S. S. Biriuzov, who was a major at the time,
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reported to 30th Irkutsk Rifle Division after completing staff officer training. He found the commander, political commissar, and all but one primary staff officer had been arrested. This left him as the division commander, a position that called for an officer at least three ranks higher and with ten more years of experience than he possessed.20

As part of this replacement process, stars fell on the Voroshilov General Staff Academy class of 1938. One-half of this class graduated ahead of schedule in 1937, including such future luminaries as A. M. Vasilevsky, A. I. Antonov, and M. V. Zakharov, all of whom were thrust precipitously into senior command and staff positions.21 Despite such promotions, the purges plus the gradual expansion of the Red Army left the force chronically short of commanders at every level. Most of the newly promoted men were not combat veterans, and the threat of arrest and execution made intelligent but inexperienced officers hesitant to deviate from textbook norms and guidelines in battle. Moreover, the turbulence in command resulted in neglect of training and maintenance. Because the concept of the Deep Operation was associated with Tukhachevsky, his execution gave mechanized organizations and doctrine a poor reputation. The Red Army recalled and destroyed many of Tukhachevsky’s theoretical writings.22

Nonetheless, this controversy did not mean a change in the essentially offensive attitudes and posture of the Soviet forces. In theory, Marxists spoke of future wars in which the Red Army would advance into central and western Europe and thereby trigger proletarian revolts in other countries. More practically, Moscow’s leaders expected an attack by the capitalists, and they therefore planned to defend their territory by immediate counterattacks.23

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), that great dress rehearsal for World War II, further hampered Soviet military development. A limited number of Soviet tanks and tankers participated on the Republican side, just as the Germans and Italians provided equipment and men to support Francisco Franco. Yet, the Soviet tanks were too lightly armored, and their improvised crews often could not communicate with the Spanish-speaking infantry they supported. In battle, the tanks tended to outrun the accompanying foot soldiers, allowing the Fascist defenders to destroy those tanks with relative ease. D. G. Pavlov, chief of armored forces and one of the most senior Soviet officers to serve in Spain, returned home with an extremely pessimistic attitude. He concluded that the new mechanized formations were too large and clumsy to control, too vulnerable to artillery fire, and unlikely to penetrate prepared enemy defenses in order to conduct deep operations. In short, armor could not attack independently but had to be integrated with the other combined arms.24

In fairness, other armies also had difficulties with mechanization during the later 1930s. Except for France, all nations produced tanks that were
inadequately armored and tended to use these tanks as independent cavalry-reconnaissance units rather than in close cooperation with the other combat arms. In the Soviet case, however, the weaknesses described by Pavlov only added to the fires of suspicion started by the Great Purges.

In July 1939, a special commission reviewed the entire question of armored force organization. The commission was chaired by another of Stalin’s cronies, Assistant Defense Commissar G. I. Kulik, and included such surviving heroes of the Russian Civil War as Marshals Budenny and S. K. Timoshenko. Few experienced armor officers or advocates of Tukhachevsky’s ideas were allowed to participate in the commission. In August, the commission reached a compromise that directed the removal of the motorized infantry elements from tank corps (the name given to mechanized corps in 1938) and tank brigades, reducing such units to an infantry-support role. The Kulik Commission did recommend the creation of four new motorized divisions that closely resembled the German panzer divisions of the day and could be used either independently for limited penetrations or as part of a larger cavalry-mechanized group for deeper, front-level exploitations. Although the Commissariat of Defense formally abolished the tank corps, in practice two of them survived. Acting on the Kulik Commission’s recommendation, on 15 November Commissar of Defense Voroshilov mandated reorganizing the Red Army into a force of 170 rifle divisions, including 3 motorized divisions, 10 mechanized divisions, 16 mountain rifle divisions, and 141 rifle divisions manned in peacetime at a strength of 12,000, 6,000, or 3,000 men each, plus 36 tank brigades of various types and 4 light tank regiments. Thus, Soviet mechanized concepts and the Red Army’s force structure had regressed to a far more primitive stage than that of 1936.

LAKE KHASAN AND KHALKHIN-GOL

The last portion of the Red Army to feel the brunt of the Great Purges was in Siberia and the Far East, where distance from Moscow combined with an external threat to limit the disorganizing effects of Stalin’s bloodbath. The Japanese seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and eastern China in 1937 brought Moscow and Tokyo into an undeclared conflict that flared twice in the late 1930s. The Soviet government reacted strongly to these challenges in a successful, if costly, effort to deter Japan from open warfare.

During July and August 1938, the two powers repeatedly clashed over possession of a narrow spit of land at Lake Khasan, 112 kilometers (70 miles) southwest of Vladivostok. On 11 August, the hard-pressed Japanese asked for an armistice, eventually withdrawing after suffering 650 killed and 2,500 wounded. Although the Soviets won the engagement, their frontal attacks
and poor combined-arms coordination cost them 960 dead, missing, or mortally wounded and 3,279 wounded or sick.28

Undeterred, the Japanese chose a remote area on the Khalkhin-Gol, the river between Outer Mongolia (a Soviet ally) and the Japanese satellite state of Manchukuo (Manchuria), to again test the Soviet will. In May 1939, the Japanese occupied the village of Nomonhan, hoping to challenge the Soviets in an area where poor roads would restrict the size of forces that the defenders could bring to bear. After an initial encounter, however, command of the Soviet forces at Khalkhin-Gol went to Corps Commander Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, one of Tukhachevsky’s most brilliant disciples. Undetected by the Japanese and despite the remote location of Nomonhan, Zhukov amassed 57,000 men, 498 tanks, and 385 armored cars organized into three rifle divisions, two tank brigades, three armored car brigades, one machine-gun brigade, and an airborne brigade. Meanwhile, the Red Air Force reinforced the area with veterans of the Spanish Civil War, who achieved lopsided victories over the Japanese pilots. At 0545 hours on Sunday, 20 August 1939, Zhukov struck. After an initial aerial bombardment, a recently mobilized territorial division attacked but became bogged down in front of the Japanese defenses. At the same time, however, Soviet mobile troops moved around both flanks and encircled most of the defending Japanese troops. The Japanese attempted to break out on 27 August but failed. On 15 September, the Japanese signed an agreement in Moscow to end the undeclared war. This brief operation cost the Soviets 9,703 killed, missing, or died of wounds and 15,952 wounded or sick; the Japanese lost 61,000 killed, wounded, or captured.29

Khalkhin-Gol had two significant results. First, the Japanese government decided that it had seriously underestimated the Soviets, which led Tokyo to look elsewhere for new spheres of influence. This contributed ultimately to the conflict with the United States, but it also secured the Soviet back door throughout World War II as Japan refrained from joining Hitler’s attack. Second, Zhukov began his meteoric rise, taking with him many of his subordinates who later became prominent wartime commanders. For example, Zhukov’s chief of staff at Khalkhin-Gol, S. I. Bogdanov, later commanded 2nd Guards Tank Army, one of the elite exploitation formations that defeated Germany.

On a limited scale, Khalkhin-Gol demonstrated the viability of the Soviet theory and force structure, but it was the one bright spot in an otherwise dismal picture. One week after Zhukov’s victory, the German Army invaded Poland, beginning the campaign that brought Germany and the Soviet Union into direct confrontation in eastern Europe. The Red Army was woefully unprepared for the challenge.